

HORRORSTORY

edited by
Karl Edward Wagner



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THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES

XIII

INTRODUCTION

13 Is a Lucky Number

SO. YOU SURVIVED 1984, did you? Now then, let's see if you can survive *The Year's Best Horror Stories: Series XIII*—presenting eighteen of the best horror stories published during 1984.

The *real* horror of 1984, at least for me, was in trying to limit my choices for this year's annual of the best horror fiction. Perhaps George Orwell meant to warn us that 1984 would be an outstanding year for horror fiction. *Series XIII* could easily have been twice the size of the present volume, and I had a few sleepless nights trying to decide which stories I would have to exclude because of space restrictions. Perhaps next year someone will write a horror story about *that*.

In any event, *The Year's Best Horror Stories: Series XIII* represents the best of the best from a Very Good Year. As usual, the stories were written by a mixture of Famous Names and of new and/or unfamiliar authors. Looking over the final line-up, I note that half of the writers have appeared in *The Year's Best Horror Stories* at least once before, while for the other half this is their first appearance. Sources of these stories range from genre magazines and anthologies to small press publications and chapbooks to literary magazines and women's/men's magazines. One story is from a convention program booklet, and another is from a comic book. The stories themselves run from quiet horror to the grisly. You'll find contemporary horror as well as traditional supernatural stories. There's science fiction alongside black humor and dark fantasy. These stories selected without regard to taboos, Big Names, or any particular subgenre of horror. I sifted through a year's output of short fiction to find stories that hold the power to chill the imagination—whether through icy terror or with a disquieting shiver. Here are the eighteen stories from 1984 that best succeeded in evoking a mood of horror.

Thirteen volumes is about the record for any best-of-the-year anthology series. Judith Merrill's outstanding best-of-the-year science fic-

tion/fantasy series lasted thirteen volumes (under various titles) from the 1950s up until the close of the 1960s. Donald Wollheim's year's-best science fiction series is the only other such series to last as long. This is the thirteenth volume of *The Year's Best Horror Stories*, begun by Sphere Books in England with Richard Davis as editor, reprinted by DAW Books in the United States and continued by DAW with Gerald W. Page as editor, and (when Page elected to devote more time to his own writing career) edited by me for the last half-dozen volumes. If you have all thirteen volumes of this series, then you have a good cross-section of the best in horror short fiction over the past decade-and-a-half. You will also have seen how young, unknown writers such as Stephen King, Ramsey Campbell, Dennis Etchison, or Charles L. Grant have developed into major forces in modern horror literature.

Stick with us. In another thirteen years some of the young, unknown writers whose work you're reading here will have become giants in the field.

The scariest is yet to come.

—Karl Edward Wagner

Mrs. Todd's Shortcut

Stephen King

Stephen King is generally considered to be the author who put horror fiction on the map. Certainly he is the author who put horror novels at the top of the bestseller charts, and subsequently made publishers think of horror fiction as something with a greater audience than a lunatic fringe of costumed sci-fi buffs. Beginning with Carrie, King has had a string of bestselling novels—'Salem's Lot, The Shining, The Stand, The Dead Zone, Firestarter, Cujo, Christine, Pet Sematary—many of which have been made into major films. King also excels as a writer of short fiction, as can be seen in his short story collections, Night Shift, Different Seasons, and the recent Skeleton Crew. Other recent books include The Talisman (with Peter Straub), Cycle of the Werewolf, The Eyes of the Dragon, and Thinner (writing as Richard Bachman).

Born September 21, 1947 in Portland, Maine, King has made frequent use of Down East backgrounds in his fiction. He and his wife, Tabitha (who also writes horror fiction), live with their children in a large Victorian house in Bangor. "Mrs. Todd's Shortcut" grew out of Tabitha's obsession with finding new shortcuts—and, yes, she does drive a Mercedes. For those who assume anything written by Stephen King is automatically published, three women's magazines rejected this story before Redbook accepted it. "Mrs. Todd's Shortcut" is one of King's finest pieces of writing, and is a further proof that King stands to become an important regionalist as well as horror writer.

"THERE GOES THE Todd woman," I said.

Homer Buckland watched the little Jaguar go by and nodded. The woman raised her hand to Homer. Homer nodded his big, shaggy head to her but didn't raise his own hand in return. The Todd family had a big summer home on Castle Lake, and Homer had been their caretaker since time out of mind. I had an idea that he disliked Worth Todd's second wife every bit as much as he'd liked 'Phelia Todd, the first one.

This was just about two years ago and we were sitting on a bench in

front of Bell's Market, me with an orange soda-pop, Homer with a glass of mineral water. It was October, which is a peaceful time in Castle Rock. Lots of the lake places still get used on the weekends, but the aggressive, boozy summer socializing is over by then and the hunters with their big guns and their expensive nonresident permits pinned to their orange caps haven't started to come into town yet. Crops have been mostly laid by. Nights are cool, good for sleeping, and old joints like mine haven't yet started to complain. In October the sky over the lake is passing fair, with those big white clouds that move so slow; I like how they seem so flat on the bottoms, and how they are a little gray there, like with a shadow of sundown foretold, and I can watch the sun sparkle on the water and not be bored for some space of minutes. It's in October, sitting on the bench in front of Bell's and watching the lake from afar off, that I still wish I was a smoking man.

"She don't drive as fast as 'Phelia," Homer said. "I swan I used to think what an old-fashion name she had for a woman that could put a car through its paces like she could."

Summer people like the Todds are nowhere near as interesting to the year-round residents of small Maine towns as they themselves believe. Year-round folk prefer their own love stories and hate stories and scandals and rumors of scandal. When that textile fellow from Amesbury shot himself, Estonia Corbridge found that after a week or so she couldn't even get invited to lunch on her story of how she found him with the pistol still in one stiffening hand. But folks are still not done talking about Joe Camber, who got killed by his own dog.

Well, it don't matter. It's just that they are different race-courses we run on. Summer people are trotters; us others that don't put on ties to do our week's work are just pacers. Even so there was quite a lot of local interest when Ophelia Todd disappeared back in 1973. Ophelia was a genuinely nice woman, and she had done a lot of things in town. She worked to raise money for the Sloan Library, helped to refurbish the war memorial, and that sort of thing. But *all* the summer people like the idea of raising money. You mention raising money and their eyes light up and commence to gleam. You mention raising money and they can get a committee together and appoint a secretary and keep an agenda. They like that. But you mention *time* (beyond, that is, one big long wallop of a combined cocktail party and committee meeting) and you're out of luck. Time seems to be what summer people mostly set a store by. They lay it by, and if they could put it up in Ball jars like preserves, why, they would. But 'Phelia Todd seemed willing to *spend* time—to do desk duty in the library as well as to raise money for it. When it got down to using

scouring pads and elbow-grease on the war memorial, 'Phelia was right out there with town women who had lost sons in three different wars, wearing an overall with her hair done up in a kerchief. And when kids needed ferrying to a summer swim program, you'd be as apt to see her as anyone headed down Landing Road with the back of Worth Todd's big shiny pickup full of kids. A good woman. Not a town woman, but a good woman. And when she disappeared, there was concern. Not grieving, exactly, because a disappearance is not exactly like a death. It's not like chopping something off with a cleaver; more like something running down the sink so slow you don't know it's all gone until long after it is.

"'Twas a Mercedes she drove," Homer said, answering the question I hadn't asked. "Two-seater sportster. Todd got it for her in sixty-four or sixty-five, I guess. You remember her taking the kids to the lake all those years they had Frogs and Tadpoles?"

"Ayuh."

"She'd drive em no more than forty, mindful they was in the back. But it chafed her. That woman had lead in her foot and a ball bearing sommers in the back of her ankle."

It used to be that Homer never talked about his summer people. But then his wife died. Five years ago it was. She was plowing a grade and the tractor tipped over on her and Homer was taken bad off about it. He grieved for two years or so and then seemed to feel better. But he was not the same. He seemed waiting for something to happen, waiting for the next thing. You'd pass his neat little house sometimes at dusk and he would be on the porch smoking a pipe with a glass of mineral water on the porch rail and the sunset would be in his eyes and pipe smoke around his head and you'd think—I did, anyway—*Homer is waiting for the next thing*. This bothered me over a wider range of my mind than I liked to admit, and at last I decided it was because if it had been me, I wouldn't have been waiting for the next thing, like a groom who has put on his morning coat and finally has his tie right and is only sitting there on a bed in the upstairs of his house and looking first at himself in the mirror and then at the clock on the mantel and waiting for it to be eleven o'clock so he can get married. If it had been me, I would not have been waiting for the next thing; I would have been waiting for the last thing.

But in that waiting period—which ended when Homer went to Vermont a year later—he sometimes talked about those people. To me, to a few others.

"She never even drove fast with her husband, s'far as I know. But when I drove with her, she made that Mercedes strut."

A fellow pulled in at the pumps and began to fill up his car. The car had a Massachusetts plate.

"It wasn't one of these new sports cars that run on unleaded gasoline and hitch every time you step on it; it was one of the old ones, and the speedometer was calibrated all the way up to a hundred and sixty. It was a funny color of brown and I ast her one time what you called that color and she said it was champagne. Ain't that *good*, I says, and she laughs fit to split. I like a woman who will laugh when you don't have to point her right at the joke, you know."

The man at the pumps had finished getting his gas.

"Afternoon, gentlemen," he says as he comes up the steps.

"A good day to you," I says, and he went inside.

"Phelia was always looking for a shortcut," Homer went on as if we had never been interrupted. "That woman was mad for a shortcut. I never saw the beat of it. She said if you can save enough distance, you'll save time as well. She said her father swore by that scripture. He was a salesman, always on the road, and she went with him when she could, and he was always lookin for the shortest way. So she got in the habit.

"I ast her one time if it wasn't kinda funny—here she was on the one hand, spendin her time rubbin up that old statue in the Square and takin the little ones to their swimmin lessons instead of playing tennis and swimming and getting boozed up like normal summer people, and on the other hand bein so damn set on savin fifteen minutes between here and Fryeburg that thinkin about it probably kep her up nights. It just seemed to me the two things went against each other's grain, if you see what I mean. She just looks at me and says, 'I like being helpful, Homer. I like driving, too—at least sometimes, when it's a challenge—but I don't like the *time* it takes. It's mending clothes—sometimes you take tucks and sometimes you let things out. Do you see what I mean?'"

"'I guess so, missus,' I says, kinda dubious.

"'If sitting behind the wheel of a car was my idea of a really good time *all* the time, I would look for long-cuts,' she says, and that tickled me s'much I had to laugh."

The Massachusetts fellow came out of the store with a six-pack in one hand and some lottery tickets in the other.

"You enjoy your weekend," Homer says.

"I always do," the Massachusetts fellow says. "I only wish I could afford to live here all year round."

"Well, we'll keep it all in good order for when you *can* come," Homer says, and the fellow laughs.

We watched him drive off toward someplace, that Massachusetts plate

showing. It was a green one. My Marcy says those are the ones the Massachusetts Motor Registry gives to drivers who ain't had a accident in that strange, angry, fuming state for two years. If you have, she says, you got to have a red one so people know to watch out for you when they see you on the roll.

"They was in-state people, you know, the both of them," Homer said, as if the Massachusetts fellow had reminded him of the fact.

"I guess I did know that," I said.

"The Todds are just about the only birds we got that fly north in the winter. The new one, I don't think she likes flying north too much."

He sipped his mineral water and fell silent a moment, thinking.

"*She* didn't mind it, though," Homer said. "At least, I *judge* she didn't although she used to complain about it something fierce. The complaining was just a way to explain why she was always lookin for a shortcut."

"And you mean her husband didn't mind her traipsing down every wood-road in tarnation between here and Bangor just so she could see if it was nine-tenths of a mile shorter?"

"He didn't care piss-all," Homer said shortly, and got up, and went in the store. There now, Owens, I told myself, you know it ain't safe to ast him questions when he's yarning, and you went right ahead and ast one, and you have bugged a story that was starting to shape up promising.

I sat there and turned my face up into the sun and after about ten minutes he came out with a boiled egg and sat down. He ate her and I took care not to say nothing and the water on Castle Lake sparkled as blue as something as might be told of in a story about treasure. When Homer had finished his egg and had a sip of mineral water, he went on. I was surprised, but still said nothing. It wouldn't have been wise.

"They had two or three different chunks of rolling iron," he said. "There was the Cadillac, and his truck, and her little Mercedes go-devil. A couple of winters he left the truck, 'case they wanted to come down and do some skiin. Mostly when the summer was over he'd drive the Caddy back up and she'd take her go-devil."

I nodded but didn't speak. In truth, I was afraid to risk another comment. Later I thought it would have taken a lot of comments to shut Homer Buckland up that day. He had been wanting to tell the story of Mrs. Todd's shortcut for a long time.

"Her little go-devil had a special odometer in it that told you how many miles was in a trip, and every time she set off from Castle Lake to Bangor she'd set it 000-point-0 and let her clock up to whatever. She had made a game of it, and she used to chafe me with it."

He paused, thinking that back over.

"No, that ain't right."

He paused more and faint lines showed up on his forehead like steps on a library ladder.

"She *made* like she made a game of it, but it was a serious business to her. Serious as anything else, anyway." He flapped a hand and I think he meant the husband. "The glovebox of the little go-devil was filled with maps, and there was a few more in the back where there would be a seat in a regular car. Some was gas station maps, and some was pages that had been pulled from the Rand-McNally Road Atlas; she had some maps from Appalachian Trail guidebooks and a whole mess of topographical survey-squares, too. It wasn't her having those maps that made me think it wa'n't a game; it was how she'd drawn lines on all of them, showing routes she'd taken or at least tried to take.

"She'd been stuck a few times, too, and had to get a pull from some farmer with a tractor and chain.

"I was there one day laying tile in the bathroom, sitting there with grout squittering out of every damn crack you could see—I dreamed of nothing but squares and cracks that was bleeding grout that night—and she come stood in the doorway and talked to me about it for quite a while. I used to chafe her about it, but I was also sort of interested, and not just because my brother Franklin used to live down-Bangor and I'd traveled most of the roads she was telling me of. I was interested just because a man like me is always uncommon interested in knowing the shortest way, even if he don't always want to take it. You that way too?"

"Ayuh," I said. There's something powerful about knowing the shortest way, even if you take the longer way because you know your mother-in-law is sitting home. Getting there quick is often for the birds, although no one holding a Massachusetts driver's license seems to know it. But *knowing* how to get there quick—or even knowing how to get there a way that the person sitting beside you don't know . . . that has power.

"Well, she had them roads like a Boy Scout has his knots," Homer said, and smiled his large, sunny grin. "She says, 'Wait a minute, wait a minute,' like a little girl, and I hear her through the wall rummaging through her desk, and then she comes back with a little notebook that looked like she'd had it a good long time. Cover was all rumpled, don't you know, and some of the pages had pulled loose from those little wire rings on one side.

"The way Worth goes—the way *most* people go—is Route 97 to Mechanic Falls, then Route 11 to Lewiston, and then the Interstate to Bangor. 156.4 miles."

I nodded.

" 'If you want to skip the turnpike—and save some distance—you'd go to Mechanic Falls, Route 11 to Lewiston, Route 202 to Augusta, then up Route 9 through China Lake and Unity and Haven to Bangor. That's 144.9 miles.'

" 'You won't save no time that way, missus,' I says, 'not going through Lewiston *and* Augusta. Although I will admit that drive up the Old Derry Road to Bangor is real pretty.'

" 'Save enough miles and soon enough you'll save time,' she says. 'And I didn't say that's the way I'd go, although I have a good many times; I'm just running down the routes most people use. Do you want me to go on?'

" 'No,' I says, 'just leave me in this cussed bathroom all by myself starin at all these cussed cracks until I start to rave.'

" 'There are four major routes in all,' she says. 'The one by Route 2 is 163.4 miles. I only tried it once. Too long.'

" 'That's the one I'd hosey if my wife called and told me it was leftovers,' I says, kinda low.

" 'What was that?' she says.

" 'Nothin,' I says, 'Talkin to the grout.'

" 'Oh. Well, the fourth—and there aren't too many who know about it, although they are all good roads—paved, anyway, is across Speckled Bird Mountain on 219 to 202 *beyond* Lewiston. Then, if you take Route 19, you can get around Augusta. Then you take the Old Derry Road. That way is just 129.2.'

" 'I didn't say nothing for a little while and p'raps she thought I was doubting her because she says, a little pert, 'I know it's hard to believe, but it's so.'

" 'I said I guessed that was about right, and I thought—looking back—it probably was. Because that's the way I'd usually go when I went down to Bangor to see Franklin when he was still alive. I hadn't been that way in years, though. Do you think a man could just—well—forget a road, Dave?'

I allowed it was possible. The turnpike is easy to think of. After a while it almost fills a man's mind, and you think not how could I get from here to there but how can I get from here to the turnpike ramp that's *closest* to there. And that made me think that maybe there are lots of roads all over that are just going begging; roads with rock walls beside them, real roads with blackberry bushes growing alongside them but nobody to eat the berries but the birds and gravel pits with old rusted chains hanging down in low curve in front of their entryways, the pits themselves as forgotten as a child's old toys with scumgrass growing up their deserted

unremembered sides. Roads that have just been forgot except by the people who live on them and think of the quickest way to get off them and onto the turnpike where you can pass on a hill and not fret over it. We like to joke in Maine that you can't get there from here, but maybe the joke is on us. The truth is there's about a damn thousand ways to do it and man doesn't bother.

Homer continued: "I grouted tile all afternoon in that hot little bathroom and she stood there in the doorway all that time, one foot crossed behind the other, bare-legged, wearin loafers and a khaki-colored skirt and a sweater that was some darker. Hair was drawed back in a hosstail. She must have been thirty-four or -five then, but her face was lit up with what she was tellin me and I swan she looked like a sorority girl home from school on vacation.

"After a while she musta got an idea of how long she'd been there cuttin the air around her mouth because she says, 'I must be boring the hell out of you, Homer.'

" 'Yes'm,' I says, 'you are. I druther you went away and left me to talk to this damn grout.'

" 'Don't be sma'at, Homer,' she says.

" 'No, missus, you ain't borin me,' I says.

"So she smiles and then goes back to it, pagin through her little notebook like a salesman checkin his orders. She had those four main ways—well, really three because she gave up on Route 2 right away—but she must have had forty different other ways that were play-offs on those. Roads with state numbers, roads without, roads with names, roads without. My head fair spun with em. And finally she says to me, 'You ready for the blue ribbon winner, Homer?'

" 'I guess so,' I says.

" 'At least it's the blue ribbon winner *so far*,' she says. 'Do you know, Homer, that a man wrote an article in *Science Today* in 1921 proving that no man could run a mile in under four minutes? He *proved* it, with all sorts of calculations based on the maximum length of the male thigh-muscles, maximum length of stride, maximum lung capacity, maximum heart-rate, and a whole lot more. I was *taken* with that article! I was so taken that I gave it to Worth and asked him to give it to Professor Murray in the math department at the University of Maine. I wanted those figures checked because I was sure they must have been based on the wrong postulates, or something. Worth probably thought I was being silly—"Ophelia's got a bee in her bonnet" is what he says—but he took them. Well, Professor Murray checked through the man's figures quite carefully . . . and do you know *what*, Homer?'

"'No, missus.'

"'Those figures were *right*. The man's criteria were *solid*. He proved, back in 1923, that a man couldn't run a mile in under four minutes. He *proved* that. But people do it all the time, and do you know that that means?'

"'No, missus,' I said, although I had a glimmer.

"'It means that no blue ribbon is forever,' she says. 'Someday—if the world doesn't explode itself in the meantime—someone will run a *two-minute* mile in the Olympics. It may take a hundred years or a thousand, but it will happen. Because there is no ultimate blue ribbon. There is zero, and there is eternity, and there is mortality, but there is no *ultimate*.'

"And there she stood, her face clean and scrubbed and shinin, that darkish hair of hers pulled back from her brow, as if to say 'Just you go ahead and disagree if you can.' But I couldn't. Because I believe something like that. It is much like what the minister means, I think, when he talks about grace.

"'You ready for the blue-ribbon winner *for now*?' she says.

"'Ayuh,' I says, and I even stopped groutin for the time bein. I'd reached the tub anyway and there wasn't nothing left but a lot of those frikkin squirrelly little corners. She drewed a deep breath and then spied it out at me as fast as that auctioneer goes over in Gates Falls when he has been putting the whiskey to himself, and I can't remember it all, but it went something like this."

Homer Buckland shut his eyes for a moment, his big hands lying perfectly still on his long thighs, his face turned up toward the sun. Then he opened his eyes again and for a moment I swan he *looked* like her, yes he did, a seventy-year-old man looking like a woman of thirty-four who was at that moment in her time looking like a college girl of twenty, and I can't remember exactly what *he* said any more than *he* could remember exactly what *she* said, not just because it was complex but because I was so fetched by how he looked sayin it, but it went close enough like this:

"'You set out Route 97 and then cut up Denton Street to the Old Townhouse Road and that way you get around Castle Rock downtown but back to 97. Nine miles up you can go an old logger's road a mile and a half to Town Road #6, which takes you to Big Anderson Road by Sites' Cedar Mill. There's a cut-road the old-timers call Bear Road, and that gets you to 219. Once you're on the far side of Speckled Bird Mountain you grab the Stanhouse Road, turn left onto the Bull Pine Road—there's a swampy patch there but you can spang right through it if you get up

enough speed on the gravel—and so you come out on Route 106. 106 cuts through Alton's Plantation to the Old Derry Road—and there's two or three woods roads there that you follow and so come out on Route 3 just beyond Derry Hospital. From there it's only four miles to Route 2 in Etna, and so into Bangor.'

"She paused to get her breath back, then looked at me. 'Do you know how long that is, all told?'

" 'No'm' I says, thinking it sounds like about a hundred and ninety miles and four bust springs.

" 'It's 116.4 miles,' she says."

I laughed. The laugh was out of me before I thought I wasn't doing myself any favor if I wanted to hear this story to the end. But Homer grinned himself and nodded.

"I know. And *you* know I don't like to argue with anyone, Dave. But there's a difference between having your leg pulled and getting it shook like a damn apple-tree.

" 'You don't believe me,' she says.

" 'Well, it's *hard* to believe, missus,' I said.

" 'Leave that grout to dry and I'll show you,' she says. "You can finish behind the tub tomorrow. Come on, Homer. I'll leave a note for Worth—he may not be back tonight anyway—and you can call your wife! We'll be sitting down to dinner in the Pilot's Grille in'—she looks at her watch—'two hours and forty-five minutes from right now. And if it's a minute longer, I'll buy you a bottle of Irish Mist to take home with you. You see, my dad was right. Save enough miles and you'll save time, even if you have to go through every damn bog and sump in Kennebec County to do it. Now what do you say?'

"She was lookin at me with her brown eyes just like lamps, there was a devilish look in them that said turn your cap around back'rds, Homer, and climb aboard this hoss, I be first and you be second and let the devil take the hindmost, and there was a grin on her face that said the exact same thing, and I tell you, Dave, I wanted to go. I didn't even want to top that damn can of grout. And I *certain* sure didn't want to drive that go-devil of hers. I wanted just to sit in it on the shotgun side and watch her get in, see her skirt come up a little, see her pull it down over her knees or not, watch her hair shine."

He trailed off and suddenly let off a sarcastic, choked laugh. That laugh of his sounded like a shotgun loaded with rock salt.

"Just call up Megan and say, 'You know 'Phelia Todd, that woman you're halfway to being so jealous of now you can't see straight and can't ever find a good word to say about her? Well, her and me is going to

make this speed-run down to Bangor in that little champagne-colored she-devil Mercedes of hers, so don't wait dinner.'

"Just call her up and say that. Oh yes. Oh *ayuh*."

And he laughed again with his hands lying there on his legs just as natural as ever was and I seen something in his face that was almost hateful and after a minute he took his glass of mineral water from the railing there and got outside some of it.

"You didn't go," I said.

"Not *then*."

He laughed, and this laugh was gentler.

"She must have seen something in my face, because it was like she found herself again. She stopped looking like a sorority girl and just looked like 'Phelia Todd again. She looked down at the notebook like she didn't know what it was she had been holding and put it down by her side, almost behind her skirt.

"I says, 'I'd like to do just that thing, missus, but I got to finish up here, and my wife has got a roast on for dinner.'

"She says, 'I understand, Homer—I just got a little carried away. I do that a lot. All the time, Worth says.' Then she kinda straightened up and says, 'But the offer holds, any time you want to go. You can even throw your shoulder to the back end if we get stuck somewhere. Might save me five dollars.' And she laughed.

"I'll take you up on it, missus," I says, and she seen that I meant what I said and wasn't just being polite.

"'And before you just go believing that a hundred and sixteen miles to Bangor is out of the question, get out your own map and see how many miles it would be as the crow flies.'

"I finished the tiles and went home and ate leftovers—there wa'n't no roast, and I think 'Phelia Todd knew it—and after Megan was in bed, I got out my yardstick and a pen and my Mobil map of the state, and I did what she had told me . . . because it had laid hold of my mind a bit, you see. I drew a straight line and did out the calculations accordin to the scale of miles. I was some surprised. Because if you went from Castle Rock up there to Bangor like one of those little Piper Cubs could fly on a clear day—if you didn't have to mind lakes, or stretches of lumber company woods that was chained off, or bogs, or crossing rivers where there wasn't no bridges, why, it would just be seventy-nine miles, give or take."

I jumped a little.

"Measure it yourself, if you don't believe me," Homer said. "I never knew Maine was so small until I seen that."

He had himself a drink, and then looked around at me.

"There come a time the next spring when Megan was away in New Hampshire visiting her brother. I had to go down to the Todds' house to take off the storm doors and put on the screens, and her little Mercedes go-devil was there. She was down by herself.

"She come to the door and says: 'Homer! Have you come to put on the screen doors?'

"And right off I says: 'No, missus, I come to see if you want to give me a ride down to Bangor the short way.'

"Well, she looked at me with no expression on her face at all, and I thought she had forgotten all about it. I felt my face gettin red, the way it will when you feel you just pulled one hell of a boner. Then, just when I was getting ready to pologize, her face busts into that grin again and she says, 'You just stand right there while I get my keys. And don't change your mind, Homer!'

"She come back a minute later with em in her hand. 'If we get stuck, you'll see mosquitoes just about the size of dragonflies.'

" 'I've seen em as big as English sparrows up in Rangely, missus,' I said, 'and I guess we're both a spot too heavy to be carried off.'

"She laughs. 'Well, I warned you, anyway. Come on, Homer.'

" 'And if we ain't there in two hours and forty-five minutes,' I says, kinda sly, 'you was gonna buy me a bottle of Irish Mist.'

"She looks at me kinda surprised, the driver's door of the go-devil open and one foot inside. 'Hell, Homer,' she says, 'I told you that was the Blue Ribbon for *then*. I've found a way up there that's *shorter*. We'll be there in two and a half hours. Get in, Homer. We are going to roll.'

He paused again, hands lying calm on his thighs, his eyes dulling, perhaps seeing that champagne-colored two-seater heading up the Todds' steep driveway.

"She stood the car still at the end of it and says, 'You sure?'

" 'Let her rip,' I says. The ball bearing in her ankle rolled and that heavy foot come down. I can't tell you nothing much about whatall happened after that. Except after a while I couldn't hardly take my eyes off her. There was somethin wild that crep into her face, Dave—somethin *wild* and something *free*, and it frightened my heart. She was beautiful, and I was took with love *for* her, anyone would have been, any man, anyway, and maybe any woman too, but I was scairt *of* her too, because she looked like she could kill you if her eye left the road and fell on you and she decided to love you back. She was wearin blue jeans and a old white shirt with the sleeves rolled up—I had a idea she was maybe fixin to paint somethin on the back deck when I came by—but after we had been goin

for a while seemed like was was dressed in nothin but all this white billowy stuff like a pitcher in one of those old gods-and-goddesses books.”

He thought, looking out across the lake, his face very somber.

“Like the huntress that was supposed to drive the moon across the sky.”

“Diana?”

“Ayuh. Moon was her go-devil. ’Phelia looked like that to me and I just tell you fair out that I was stricken in love for her and never would have made a move, even though I was some younger then than I am now. I would not have made a move even had I been twenty, although I suppose I might of at sixteen, and been killed for it—killed if she looked at me was the way it felt.

“She was like that woman drivin the moon across the sky, halfway up over the splashboard with gossamer stoles all flyin out behind her in silver cobwebs and her hair streamin back to show the dark little hollows of her temples, lashin those horses and tellin me to get along faster and never mind how they blowed, just faster, faster, *faster*.

“We went down a lot of woods roads—the first two or three I knew, and after that I didn’t know none of them. We must have been a sight to those trees that had never seen nothing with a motor in it before but big old pulp-trucks and snowmobiles; that little go-devil that would most likely have looked more at home on the Sunset Boulevard than shooting through those woods, spitting and bulling its way up one hill and then slamming down the next through those dusty green bars of afternoon sunlight—she had the top down and I could smell everything in those woods, and you know what an old fine smell that is, like something which has been mostly left alone and is not much troubled. We went on across corduroy which had been laid over some of the boggiest parts, and black sand squelched up between some of those cut logs and she laughed like a kid. Some of the logs was old and rotted, because there hadn’t been nobody down a couple of those roads—except for her, that is—in I’m going to say five or ten years. We was *alone*, except for the birds and whatever animals seen us. The sound of that go-devil’s engine, first buzzin along and then windin up high and fierce when she punched in the clutch and shifted down . . . that was the only motor-sound I could hear. And although I knew we had to be close to *someplace* all the time—I mean, these days you always are—I started to feel like we had gone back in time, and there wasn’t *nothing*. That if we stopped and I climbed a high tree, I wouldn’t see nothing in any direction but woods and woods and more woods. And all the time she’s just *hammering* that thing along, her hair all out behind her, smilin, her eyes flashin. So we come out on

the Speckled Bird Mountain Road and for a while I known where we were again, and then she turned off and for just a little bit I *thought* I knew, and then I didn't even bother to kid myself no more. We went cut-slam down another woods road, and then we come out—I swear it—on a nice paved road with a sign that said MOTORWAY B. You ever heard of a road in the state of Maine that was called MOTORWAY B?”

“No,” I says. “Sounds English.”

“Ayuh. *Looked* English. These trees like willows overhung the road. ‘Now watch out here, Homer,’ she says, ‘one of those nearly grabbed me a month ago and gave me an Indian burn.’

“I didn’t know what she was talkin about and started to say so, and then I seen that even though there was no wind, the branches of those trees was dippin down—they was *waverin* down. They looked black and wet inside the fuzz of green on them. I couldn’t believe what I was seein. Then one of em snatched off my cap and I knew I wasn’t asleep. ‘Hi!’ I shouts, ‘Give that back!’

“‘Too late now, Homer,’ she says, and laughs. ‘There’s daylight, just up ahead . . . we’re okay.’

“Then another one of ‘em comes down, on her side this time, and snatches at her—I swear it did. She ducked, and it caught in her hair and pulled a lock of it out. ‘Ouch, dammit that *hurts!*’ she yells, but she was laughin, too. The car swerved a little when she ducked and I got a look into the woods and holy God, Dave! *Everythin* in there was movin. There was grass wavin and plants that was all knotted together so it seemed like they made faces, and I seen somethin sittin in a squat on top of a stump, and it looked like tree-toad, only it was as big as a full-grown cat.

“Then we come out of the shade to the top of a hill and she says, ‘There! That was exciting, wasn’t it?’ as if she was talkin about no more than a walk through the Haunted House at the Fryeburg Fair.

“About five minutes later we swung onto another of her woods roads. I didn’t want no more woods right then—I can tell you that for sure—but these were just plain old woods. Half an hour after that, we was pulling into the parking lot of the Pilot’s Grille in Bangor. She points to that little odometer for trips and says, ‘Take a gander, Homer.’ I did, and it said 111.6. ‘What do you think now? Do you believe in my shortcut?’

“That wild look had mostly faded out of her, and she was just ‘Phelia Todd again. But that other look wasn’t entirely gone. It was like she was two women, ‘Phelia and Diana, and the part of her that was Diana was so much in control when she was driving the back roads that the part that was ‘Phelia didn’t have no idea that her shortcut was taking her

through places . . . places that ain't on any map of Maine, not even on those survey-squares.

"She says again, 'What do you think of my shortcut, Homer?'

"And I says the first thing to come into my mind, which ain't something you'd usually say to a lady like 'Phelia Todd. 'It's a real pill-cutter, missus,' I says.

"She laughs, just as pleased as punch, and I seen it then, just as clear as glass: She didn't remember none of the funny stuff. Not the willow-branches—except they weren't willows, not at all, not anything like em, or anything else—that grabbed off m'hat, not that MOTORWAY B sign, or that awful-lookin toad-thing. *She didn't remember none of that funny stuff!* Either I had dreamed it was there or she had dreamed it wasn't. All I knew for sure, Dave, was that we had rolled only a hundred and eleven miles and gotten to Bangor, and that wasn't no daydream; it was right there on the little go-devil's odometer, in black and white.

" 'Well, it is,' she says. 'It is a piss-cutter. I only wish I could get Worth to give it a go sometime . . . but he'll never get out of his rut unless someone blasts him out of it, and it would probably take a Titan II missile to do that, because I believe he has built himself a fallout shelter at the bottom of that rut. Come on in, Homer, and let's dump some dinner into you.'

"And she bought me one hell of a dinner, Dave, but I couldn't eat very much of it. I kep thinkin about what the ride back might be like, now that it was drawing down dark. Then, about halfway through the meal, she excused herself and made a telephone call. When she came back she ast me if I would mind drivin the go-devil back to Castle Rock for her. She said she had talked to some woman who was on the same school committee as her, and the woman said they had some kind of problem about somethin or other. She said she'd grab herself a Hertz car if Worth couldn't see her back down. 'Do you mind awfully driving back in the dark?' she ast me.

"She looked at me, kinda smilin, and I knew she remembered *some* of it all right—Christ knows how much, but she remembered enough to know I wouldn't want to try her way after dark, if ever at all . . . although I seen by the light in her eyes that it wouldn't have bothered her a bit.

"So I said it wouldn't bother me, and I finished my meal better than when I started it. It was drawin down dark by the time we was done, and she run us over to the house of the woman she'd called. And when she gets out she looks at me with that same light in her eyes and says, 'Now, you're *sure* you don't want to wait, Homer? I saw a couple of side roads

just today, and although I can't find them on my maps, I think they might chop a few miles.'

"I says, 'Well, missus, I would, but at my age the best bed to sleep in is my own, I've found. I'll take your car back and never put a ding in her . . . although I guess I'll probably put on some more miles than you did.'

"Then she laughed, kind of soft, and she give me a kiss. That was the best kiss I ever had in my whole life, Dave. It was just on the cheek, and it was the chaste kiss of a married woman, but it was as ripe as a peach, or like those flowers that open in the dark, and when her lips touched my skin I felt like . . . I don't know exactly what I felt like, because a man can't easily hold on to those things that happened to him with a girl who was ripe when the world was young or how those things felt—I'm talking around what I mean, but I think you understand. Those things all get a red cast to them in your memory and you cannot see through it at all.

" 'You're a sweet man, Homer, and I love you for listening to me and riding with me,' she says. 'Drive safe.'

"Then in she went, to that woman's house. Me, I drove home."

"How did you go?" I asked.

He laughed softly. "By the turnpike, you damned fool," he said, and I never seen so many wrinkles in his face before as I did then.

He sat there, looking into the sky.

"Came the summer she disappeared. I didn't see much of her . . . that was the summer we had the fire, you'll remember, and then the big storm that knocked down all the trees. A busy time for caretakers. Oh, I *thought* about her from time to time, and about that day, and about that kiss, and it started to seem like a dream to me. Like one time, when I was out plowing George Bascomb's west field, the one that looks acrost the lake at the mountains, dreamin about what teenage boys dream of. And I pulled up this rock with the harrow blades, and it split open, and it *bled*. At least, it looked to me like it bled. Red stuff come runnin out of the cleft in the rock and soaked into the soil. And I never told no one but my mother, and I never told her what it meant to me, or what happened to me, although she washed my drawers and maybe she knew. Anyway, she suggested I ought to pray on it. Which I did, but I never got no enlightenment, and after a while something started to suggest to my mind that it had been a dream. It's that way, sometimes. There is holes in the *middle*, Dave. Do you know that?"

"Yes," I says, thinking of one night when I'd seen something. That was in '59, a bad year for us, but my kids didn't know it was a bad year; all they knew was that they wanted to eat just like always. I'd seen a bunch of whitetail in Henry Brugger's back field, and I was out there after dark

with a jacklight in August. You can shoot two when they're summer-fat; the second'll come back and sniff at the first as if to say *What the hell? Is it fall already?* and you can pop him like a bowlin pin. You can hack off enough meat to feed yowwens for six weeks and bury what's left. Those are two whitetails the hunters who come in November don't get a shot at, but kids have to eat. Like the man from Massachusetts said, *he'd* like to be able to afford to live here the year around, and all I can say is sometimes you pay for the privilege after dark. So there I was, and I seen this big orange light in the sky; it comes down and down, and I stood and watched it with my mouth hung on down to my breastbone and when it hit the lake the whole of it was lit up for a minute a purple-orange that seemed to go right up to the sky in rays. Wasn't nobody ever said nothing to me about that light, and I never said nothing to nobody myself, partly because I was afraid they'd laugh, but also because they'd wonder what the hell I'd been doing out there after dark to start with. And after a while it was like Homer said—it seemed like a dream I had once had, and it didn't signify to me because I couldn't make nothing of it which would turn under my hand. It was like a moonbeam. It didn't have no handle and it didn't have no blade. I couldn't make it work so I left it alone, like a man does when he knows the day is going to come up nevertheless.

"There are *holes* in the middle of things," Homer said, and he sat up straighter, like he was mad. "Right in the damn *middle* of things, not even to the left or right where your p'riph'ral vision is and you could say, 'Well, but hell—' They are there and you go around them like you'd go around a pothole in the road that would break an axle. You know? And you forget it. Or like if you are plowin, you can plow a dip. But if there's somethin like a *break* in the earth, where you see darkness, like a cave might be there, you say 'Go around, old hoss. Leave that alone! I got a good shot over here to the left'ards.' Because it wasn't a cave you was lookin for, or some kind of college excitement, but good plowin.

"*Holes* in the *middle* of things."

He fell still a long time then and I let him be still. Didn't have no urge to move him. And at last he says:

"She disappeared in August. I seen her for the first time in early July, and she looked . . . "Homer turned to me and spoke each word with careful spaced emphasis. "Dave Owens, she looked *gorgeous!* Gorgeous and wild and almost untamed. The little wrinkles I'd started to notice around her eyes all seemed to be gone. Worth Todd, he was at some conference or something in Boston. And she stands there at the edge of

the deck—I was out in the middle with my shirt off—and she says ‘Homer, you’ll never believe it.’

“‘No, missus, but I’ll try,’ I says.

“‘I found two new roads,’ she says, ‘and I got to Bangor this last time in just sixty-seven miles.’

“I remembered what she said before and I says, ‘That’s not possible, missus. Beggin your pardon, but I did the mileage on the map myself, and seventy-nine is tops . . . as the crow flies.’

“She laughed, and she looked prettier than ever. Like a goddess in the sun, on one of those hills in a story where there’s nothing but green grass and fountains and no puckies to tear at a man’s forearms at all. ‘That’s right,’ she says, ‘and you can’t run a mile in under four minutes. It’s been mathematically *proved*.’

“‘It ain’t the same,’ I says.

“‘It’s the same,’ she says. ‘Fold the map and see how many miles it is then, Homer. It can be a little less than a straight line if you fold it a little, or it can be a lot less if you fold it a lot.’

“I remembered our ride then, the way you remember a dream, and I says, ‘Missus, you can fold a map on paper but you can’t fold *land*. Or at least you shouldn’t ought to try. You want to leave it alone.’

“‘No, sir,’ she says. ‘It’s the one thing right now in my life that I won’t leave alone, because it’s *there*, and it’s *mine*.’

“Three weeks later—this would be about two weeks before she disappeared—she give me a call from Bangor. She says, ‘Worth has gone to New York, and I am coming down. I’ve misplaced my damn key, Homer. I’d like you to open the house so I can get in.’

“Well, that call come at eight o’clock, just when it was starting to come down dark. I had a sanwidge and a beer before leaving—about twenty minutes. Then I took a ride down there. All in all, I’d say I was forty-five minutes. When I got down there to the Todds’, I seen there was a light on in the pantry I didn’t leave on while I was comin down the driveway. I was lookin at that, and I almost run right into her little go-devil. It was parked kind of on a slant, the way a drunk would park it, and it was splashed with muck all the way up to the windows, and there was this stuff stuck in that mud along the body that looked like seaweed . . . only when my lights hit it, it seemed to be *movin*. I parked behind it and got out of my truck. That stuff wasn’t seaweed, but it *was* weeds, and it *was* movin . . . kinda slow and sluggish, like it was dyin. I touched a piece of it, and it tried to wrap itself around my hand. It felt nasty and awful. I drug my hand away and wiped it on my pants. I went around to the front of the car. It looked like it had come through about ninety miles of splash

and low country. Looked *tired*, it did. Bugs was splashed all over the windshield—only they didn't look like no kind of bugs *I* ever seen before. There was a moth that was about the size of a sparrow, its wings still flappin a little, feeble and dyin. There were things like mosquitoes, only they had real eyes that you could see—and they seemed to be seein *me*. I could hear those weeds scrapin against the body of the go-devil, dyin, tryin to get a hold on somethin. And all I could think was Where in the hell has she been? And how did she get here in only three-quarters of an hour? Then I seen somethin else. There was some kind of a animal half-smashed onto the radiator grille, just under where that Mercedes ornament is—the one that looks kinda like a star looped up into a circle? Now most small animals you kill on the road is bore right under the car, because they are crouching when it hits them, hoping it'll just go over and leave them with their hide still attached to their meat. But every now and then one will jump, not away, but right at the damn car, as if to get in one good bite of whatever the buggardly thing is that's going to kill it—I have known that to happen. This thing had maybe done that. And it looked mean enough to jump a Sherman tank. It looked like something which come of a mating between a woodchuck and weasel, but there was other stuff thrown in that a body didn't even want to look at. It hurt your eyes, Dave; worse'n that, it hurt your *mind*. Its pelt was matted with blood, and there was claws sprung out of the pads on its feet like a cat's claws, only longer. It had big yellowy eyes, only they was glazed. When I was a kid I had a porcelain marble—a croaker—that looked like that. And teeth. Long thin needle teeth that looked almost like darning needles, stickin out of its mouth. Some of them was sunk right into that steel grillwork. That's why it was still hangin on; it had hung its *own* self on by the teeth. I looked at it and knowed it had a headful of poison just like a rattlesnake, and it jumped at that go-devil when it saw it was about to be run down, trying to bite it to death. And I wouldn't be the one to try and yonk it offa there because I had cuts on my hands—hay-cuts—and I thought it would kill me as dead as a stone parker if some of that poison seeped into the cuts.

"I went around to the driver's door and opened it. The inside light come on, and I looked at that special odometer that she set for trips . . . and what I seen there was 31.6.

"I looked at that for a bit, and then I went to the back door. She'd forced the screen and broke the glass by the lock so she could get her hand through and let herself in. There was a note that said: 'Dear Homer—got here a little sooner than I thought I would. Found a shortcut, and it is a dilly! You hadn't come yet so I let myself in like a burglar.

Worth is coming day after tomorrow. Can you get the screen fixed and the door reglazed by then? Hope so. Things like that always bother him. If I don't come out to say hello, you'll know I'm asleep. The drive was very tiring, but I was here in no time! Ophelia.'

"*Tirin!* I took another look at that bogey-thing hangin offa the grille of her car, and I thought Yessir, it *must* have been tiring. By God, *yes*."

He paused again, and cracked a restless knuckle.

"I seen her only once more. About a week later. Worth was there, but he was swimmin out in the lake, back and forth, back and forth, like he was sawin wood or signin papers. More like he was signin papers, I guess.

"'Missus,' I says, 'this ain't my business, but you ought to leave well enough alone. That night you come back and broke the glass of the door to come in, I seen something hangin off the front of your car—'

"'Oh, the chuck! I took care of that,' she says.

"'Christ!' I says. 'I hope you took some care!'

"'I wore Worth's gardening gloves,' she said. 'It wasn't anything anyway, Homer, but a jumped-up woodchuck with a little poison in it.'

"'But missus,' I says, 'where there's woodchucks there's bears. And if that's what the woodchucks look like along your shortcut, what's going to happen to you if a bear shows up?'

"She looked at me, and I seen that other woman in her—that Diana-woman. She says, 'If things are different along those roads, Homer, maybe I am different, too. Look at this.'

"Her hair was done up in a clip at the back, looked sort of like a butterfly and had a stick through it. She let it down. It was the kind of hair that would make a man wonder what it would look like spread out over a pillow. She says, 'It was coming in gray, Homer. Do you see any gray?' And she spread it with her fingers so the sun could shine on it.

"'No'm,' I says.

"She looks at me, her eyes all a-sparkle, and she says, 'Your wife is a good woman, Homer Buckland, but she has seen me in the store and in the post office, and we've passed the odd word or two, and I have seen her looking at my hair in a kind of satisfied way that only women know. I know what she says, and what she tells her friends . . . that Ophelia Todd has started dyeing her hair. But I have not. I have lost my way looking for a shortcut more than once . . . lost my way . . . and lost my gray.' And she laughed, not like a college girl but like a girl in high school. I admired her and longed for her beauty, but I seen that other beauty in her face as well just then . . . and I felt afraid again. Afraid *for* her, and afraid *of* her.

" 'Missus,' I says, 'you stand to lose more than a little sta'ch in your hair.'

" 'No,' she said. 'I tell you I am different over there . . . I am *all myself* over there. When I am going along that road in my little car I am not Ophelia Todd, Worth Todd's wife who could never carry a child to term, or that woman who tried to write poetry and failed at it, or the woman who sits and takes notes in committee meetings, or anything or anyone else. When I am on that road I am in the heart of myself, and I feel like—'

" 'Diana,' I said.

"She looked at me kind of funny and kind of surprised, and then she laughed. 'O like some goddess, I suppose,' she said. 'She will do better than most because I am a night person—I love to stay up until my book is done or until the National Anthem comes on the TV, and because I am very pale, like the moon—Worth is always saying I need a tonic, or blood tests or some sort of similar bosh. But in her heart what every woman wants to be is some kind of goddess, I think—men pick up a ruined echo of that thought and try to put them on pedestals (a woman, who will pee down her own leg if she does not squat! It's funny when you stop to think of it)—but what a man senses is not what a woman wants. A woman wants to be in the clear, is all. To stand if she will, or walk . . . "Her eyes turned toward that little go-devil in the driveway, and narrowed. Then she smiled. 'Or to *drive*, Homer. A man will not see that. He thinks a goddess wants to loll on a slope somewhere on the foothills of Olympus and eat fruit, but there is no god or goddess in that. All a woman wants is what a man wants—a woman wants to *drive*.'

" 'Be careful where you drive, missus, is all,' I says, and she laughs and give me a kiss spang in the middle of the forehead.

"She says, 'I will, Homer,' but it didn't mean nothing, and I know it, because she said it like a man who says he'll be careful to his wife or his girl when he knows he won't . . . can't.

"I went back to my truck and waved to her once, and it was a week later that Worth reported her missing. Her and that go-devil both. Todd waited seven years and had her declared legally dead, and then he waited another year for good measure—I'll give the sucker that much—and then he married the second Missus Todd, the one that just went by. And I don't expect you'll believe a single damn word of the whole yarn."

In the sky one of those big flat-bottomed clouds moved enough to disclose the ghost of the moon—half-full and pale as milk. And something in my heart leaped up at the sight, half in fright, half in love.

"I do though," I said. "Every frigging damned word. And even if it ain't true, Homer, it ought to be."

He give me a hug around the neck with his forearm, which is all men can do since the world don't let them kiss but only women, and laughed, and got up.

"Even if it *shouldn't* ought to be, it is," he said. He got his watch out of his pants and looked at it. "I got to go down the road and check on the Scott place. You want to come?"

"I believe I'll sit here for a while," I said, "and think."

He went to the steps, then turned back and looked at me, half-smiling. "I believe she was right," he said. "She *was* different along those roads she found . . . wasn't nothing that would dare touch her. You or me, maybe, but not her.

"And I believe she's young."

Then he got in his truck and set off to check the Scott place.

That was two years ago, and Homer has since gone to Vermont, as I think I told you. One night he came over to see me. His hair was combed, he had a shave, and he smelled of some nice lotion. His face was clear and his eyes were alive. That night he looked sixty instead of seventy, and I was glad for him and I envied him and I hated him a little, too. Arthritis is one buggardly great old fisherman, and that night Homer didn't look like arthritis had any fishhooks sunk into his hands the way they were sunk into mine.

"I'm going," he said.

"Ayuh?"

"Ayuh."

"All right; did you see to forwarding your mail?"

"Don't want none forwarded," he said. "My bills are paid. I am going to make a clean break."

"Well, give me your address. I'll drop you a line from one time to the another, old hoss." Already I could feel loneliness settling over me like a cloak . . . and looking at him, I knew that things were not quite what they seemed.

"Don't have none yet," he said.

"All right," I said. "Is it Vermont, Homer?"

"Well," he said, "It'll do for people who want to know."

I almost didn't say it and then I did. "What does she look like now?"

"Like Diana," he said. "But she is kinder."

"I envy you, Homer," I said, and I did.

I stood at the door. It was twilight in that deep part of summer when the fields fill with perfume and Queen Anne's Lace. A full moon was beating a silver track across the lake. He went across my porch and down

the steps. A car was standing on the soft shoulder of the road, its engine idling heavy, the way the old ones do that still run full bore straight ahead and damn the torpedoes. Now that I think of it, the car *looked* like a torpedo. It looked beat up some, but as if it could go the ton without breathin hard. He stopped at the foot of my steps and picked something up—it was his gas-can, the big one that holds ten gallons. He went down my walk to the passenger side of the car. She leaned over and opened the door. The inside light came on and just for a moment I saw her, long red hair around her face, her forehead shining like a lamp. Shining like the *moon*. He got in and she drove away. I stood out on my porch and watched the taillights of her little go-devil twinkling red in the dark . . . getting smaller and smaller. They were like embers, then they were like flickerflies, and then they were gone.

Vermont, I tell the folks from town, and Vermont they believe, because it's as far as most of them can see inside their heads. Sometimes I almost believe it myself, mostly when I'm tired and done up. Other times I think about them, though—all this October I have done so, it seems, because October is the time when men think mostly about far places and the roads which might get them there. I sit on the bench in front of Bell's Market and think about Homer Buckland and about the beautiful girl who leaned over to open his door when he come down that path with the full red gasoline can in his right hand—she looked like a girl of no more than sixteen, a girl on her learner's permit, and her beauty *was* terrible, but I believe it would no longer kill the man it turned itself on; for a moment her eyes lit on me, I was not killed, although part of me died at her feet.

Olympus must be a glory to the eyes and the heart, and there are those who crave it and those who find a clear way to it, mayhap, but I know Castle Rock like the back of my hand and I could never leave it for no shortcuts where the roads may go; in October the sky over the lake is no glory but it is passing fair, with those big white clouds that move so slow; I sit here on the bench, and think about 'Phelia Todd and Homer Buckland, and I don't necessarily wish I was where they are . . . but I still wish I was a smoking man.

Are You Afraid of the Dark?

Charles L. Grant

Charles L. Grant was born in New Jersey in 1942 and has lived in that state most of his life, except for four years at Trinity College in Connecticut and two years as an MP in Vietnam. Grant's first story was published in 1968, while he was a high school teacher. He turned to writing full-time in 1975. He has published some twenty books—novels and short story collections—and has edited almost as many anthologies, most notably the Shadows series for Doubleday. In addition, Grant has published over eighty short stories in various magazines and anthologies, and (under the pseudonyms Felicia Andrews and Deborah Lewis) he has written a dozen gothic novels. His recent books include Night Songs, The Tea Party, and The Long Night of the Grave, as well as the anthologies, Shadows 8, Midnights 1, and Greystone Bay. In 1984 Grant contributed one-third of the three-author anthology series from Dark Harvest, Night Visions, and in 1985 he is guest editor of Night Visions 2.

Somehow Grant found time from his busy schedule to be Guest of Honour at Fantasycon IX in Birmingham, England this past fall. It was in the Fantasycon IX Programme Booklet that "Are You Afraid of the Dark?" first appeared. The story is one of Grant's best, and it is a pleasure to be able to present it to the wider audience it deserves.

THE STORM BEGAN MOVING just below the horizon, setting houses and trees in sharp silhouette, freezing the clouds in gray and roiling white; it buried the sunset and drove off the stars and replaced the moon's shadows with strobic shadows of its own.

Yet it was harmless out there, far enough away to make people smile, glance at their watches and walk only a bit faster. There was no warning in the forecast, and its own warning was muttered, softened by the spring air just an hour ago filled with sun and new flowers and leaves brilliant green on the trees along the curbs.

Then the breeze became a wind, and the storm turned around, a

panther stalking the night with flashes of lightning where its claws touched the ground, grumblings of thunder when it spotted its prey.

The breeze became a wind, and the temperature dropped, and all that was left was the waiting for the rain.

The padded deacon's bench had been turned around to face the picture window in the den. The floral draperies had been pulled back, the lights had been turned off, and the backyard was visible only between the blinks of an eye, as the storm moved overhead and crashed down on the house. Lightning escaped the confines of black clouds, flaring, crackling, giving the trees angled movement and turning the back hedge into a huge black wall. The ornamental wishing well, the birdbath, the tool shed in the corner, all of them curiously flat when the air burned blue-white ahead of the thunder. The leaves were silver, the grass pale gray, and the reflections in the pane were bloodless and transparent.

"She's right," Jeremy Kneale said, squirming on the bench but not wanting to leave. "Bernie's right, it's just like a movie."

"It is not. It's stupid. It's dark out, can't you see that?" Stacey flinched at the next lightning bolt, but he still wasn't impressed. "It's dumb. I wanna watch TV."

"Bernie says we can't," Will reminded him. "She says we have to wait until something good comes on."

"Her real name," said Stacey, "is Bernadette, and Bernadette is a real pain in the ass."

Jeremy winced at the way his friend talked about their new babysitter, but he didn't say a word. Scolding Stacey Parsons was a waste of time. He knew that. He had heard his mother tell his father that a hundred times, and heard them wonder how the boy's parents managed without strangling him. That part was a joke; at least, he thought it was a joke.

Behind them, through the swinging door that led into the kitchen, they could hear Bernie working. Making popcorn. Fixing trays. Getting glasses from the cupboard and pouring them soda.

"I feel stupid," Will confessed at last.

Jeremy did too, but he wouldn't admit it. He was in enough trouble already, and the one thing he didn't need was Bernie telling his folks that he was being difficult again. Yet it wasn't his fault. He liked to explore things, go places, find new games to play with his best friends in the whole world. Just because it sometimes got him into trouble with the neighbors, or with people he didn't even know, didn't mean he was bad. Like the window this afternoon at the toy shop. He didn't mean to break it, but Stacey had ducked when he'd tossed the rock at him. Not a throw,

just a toss, and it must have hit the pane just right because the next thing they knew there was glass all over the pavement and lots of big people reaching for them so they wouldn't run away.

It was an accident.

His parents didn't believe him.

And parents, Stacey had said once, never believed the kid when there was a grownup around. You had to be big to be believed; you had to be able to defend yourself with something else besides tears.

"I'm hungry," Will Young said, standing and walking away from the window. He turned on a lamp, blinking at the light.

"Yeah," said Stacey. He stood, gestured, and he and Jeremy turned the bench around where it belonged. Then he closed the drapes and sat again, hands in his lap, feet swinging. "I wish she'd hurry up."

"It's like prison," Will said, rubbing his hands together and grinning. "Bernie is the guard, see, and our parents are off to see the governor, to find out when they're going to throw the switch."

"Where'd you hear that?" Jeremy asked.

"Saw it in a movie."

Jeremy shook his head. "I saw that movie, and you got it wrong. They're supposed to find out if the governor is going to stop them from throwing the switch."

"Sure," Stacey said. "Did you see the look on my father's face when he found out what happened today?" He shuddered. "I know that look. He's gonna be right there by the guy with the black mask. He's gonna throw the switch himself."

Jeremy had to agree. He had never seen any of their parents so angry before. As if he and his buddies had deliberately set out to find trouble, or cause it when they couldn't find it, and lied about it when they did. Of course, they didn't always tell the truth because then they'd really get clobbered. As it was, they were supposed to stay on their own property for a whole two weeks, and the only reason they were allowed together tonight was because his father had decided it was time the six grownups got together and decided what to do about taming their hellions.

He didn't know exactly what hellions meant when he heard his father on the phone with Mr. Young the other night, but he did know it wasn't good. And he knew that this time they weren't going to be able to cry or beg or pout their way out of whatever punishment there was going to be. Staying home wasn't punishment; staying home was only getting ready for whatever big stuff was coming after.

Lightning; and thunder.

Ashes in the fireplace shifting into piles.

The wind rattling the pane and keening through the eaves.

The boys jumped, smiled nervously, and jumped again when the kitchen door pushed open and Bernie came out with a tray in her hands. She walked to the cardtable in the middle of the room and put the tray in the center. There were three glasses filled with soda, a huge bowl of popcorn, and three chocolate candy bars.

None of the boys moved. They only watched as the babysitter frowned at the closed drapes, at the turned-around bench, and at Will still standing by the floorlamp in the corner. Her short brown hair seemed darker tonight, her eyes deeper, her nose sharper, and when she brushed her hands down the side of her dress, she seemed less like a friend than the guard Will had described.

"I thought," she said, "you were going to watch the storm."

"That's dumb," Stacey told her.

"Yeah," Will agreed.

She turned to Jeremy then and waited for his answer.

He shrugged. He didn't want to get her mad, didn't want her to tell his mother and father he was being a pain again. Bernie was all right, and he wanted to keep her on his side. She had stayed with him twice before, and with Stacey and Will too, just after the big trouble started, and though she sometimes made him nervous the way she looked at him, the way she walked around the house without making a sound, he thought she was pretty okay, for a grownup.

"Sit," she said, and pointed at the bench.

They did, sensing something in her manner that forestalled rebellion. Besides, they could smell the butter on the popcorn, see the bubbles in the soda, and the chocolate bars were the largest they had ever seen in their lives.

"We're going to have a contest," she told them, standing behind the table with her hands folded at her waist. "It's going to be a lot of fun. The only thing is, you can't be afraid."

"Afraid?" Stacey said. "Who's afraid?"

Bernie smiled slowly. "Aren't you scared of the dark?"

Stacey laughed, Will sneered, Jeremy pulled on his ear.

She stared at them until Will giggled.

"Stace is scared of the ocean," he said, taking a punch on the arm.

"Yeah? Well, you're scared of the dark, you even still gotta nightlight."

Jeremy kept silent—he was only scared of his parents.

"Good," she said. "That's fine, because the contest, you see, is a series of games that I pick for you to play."

"Big deal," said Will, poking Jeremy in the ribs.

"What is it, spin the bottle?" Stacey said, laughing until he saw the look on her face.

"Thank you," she said. "Now pay attention, please. I want you to listen closely. Since you're not afraid of the dark, I'll pick something . . ." She looked to the ceiling, looked down, and touched the table. "If you get scared, you lose."

"Jesus, Bernie," Stacey said. "We're not babies, you know."

"I know," she told him. "And that's what I told your parents. You're not babies any more. You can take it. You're tough."

"Right," Stacey said, Will nodded emphatically, and Jeremy said, "Take what?"

Bernie ignored him. "The rules are simple: I pick the games, nobody quits before the end, and for every game you win you get to keep a bar of this chocolate."

"That's not fair!" Stacey complained.

Bernie smiled. "Second place gets popcorn."

"Hey!" said Will.

"And last place gets to sleep in the rain."

Jeremy looked at his friends, looked at Bernie, and decided that this wasn't going to be a good night after all.

She looked at her watch. "We'd better get started. I promised your parents we'd be done before they return. Are you ready?"

They each nodded, staring at the chocolate bars each weighing three pounds.

"In that case," she said, in the thunder, in the lightning, while the wind knocked on the door, "the first game is: "

hide-and-seek

It was dark, so dark it was like living in a black cloud.

And it was quiet, except for the sound of his breathing.

Will Young closed his mouth and his eyes and wished he wasn't so fat. His mother was always yelling at him for eating too much, and for sneaking food into his bedroom after he was supposed to be asleep. But he didn't care. He enjoyed eating. It didn't matter what there was in the cupboards or in the refrigerator as long as it was good—and there wasn't much he didn't like.

And he didn't think he was really gross-and-ugly fat, not like his father was, with his belly showing even when his shirt was all buttoned. He just had a little extra here and there around his waist and his face, and that definitely didn't stop him from being able to run, or climb, or crawl under

the porch; at least his arms didn't have all that flab hanging down, and at least his thighs didn't rub together because there was no room between them.

Nevertheless, he wished now he was a little slimmer, because then he could squeeze a bit farther back in the closet, maybe behind the golf bag that belonged to Jerry's father. He didn't think he'd have to stay here very long because Stacey said it was a dumb game and didn't want to play and would probably deliberately get himself caught first. Jerry knew the house better than anyone, but Will thought he was scared of something and would probably head right for the cellar, the first place Bernie would look.

The huge closet in the upstairs hall, then, was almost perfect when he found it. Clothes and coats hanging from the rail, boxes and stuff stacked on the floor, and the door so snug no light came underneath it.

He reached out his hands and felt around him, trying to move things in front and move himself farther back, without making any noise. He breathed through his mouth. He froze whenever he heard footsteps passing outside.

And he finally reached the corner after moving the golf bag aside.

Perfect. Dark, but perfect. Bernie would have to declare him the winner of this game, no question about it.

He grinned, and rubbed his hands together.

He pulled his knees up to his chest, and listened to the muffled spill of thunder over the roof.

And heard something move on the other side of the closet.

He blinked and cocked his head, frowning as he listened as hard as he could and wondering what it was, or maybe it was his imagination.

A *scratching*, soft and slow, maybe it's a rat or a bat or something that lives in the back of the closet and waits for dopes like him to play stupid baby games in the middle of a storm; a *scratching*, soft and slow, and something suddenly brushed quickly over his face. He almost yelled as he lashed out to knock it away, nearly yelled again when his fingers were caught, trapped in something that had round hard teeth. His free hand grabbed for it while he pushed deeper into the corner, grabbed and yanked, and something fell over his face.

He did yell, then, but the sound was muffled, all sound deadened as his feet kicked out and struck the golf bag, as his head slammed against the wall, as his hands tore and pulled and the thing dropped and tangled into his lap, and a coat hanger a moment later fell onto his chest.

Shit, he thought as he felt the jacket on his legs, the round buttons, the smooth lapels. Shit, you're a jerk.

He shuddered and rolled his shoulders, wiped a hand over his eyes and felt the perspiration slick on his face. He dried himself with the jacket and pulled the golf bag back in front of him, proud that he'd fought the demons and hadn't been killed.

Besides, this proved that he'd made a good choice. This proved he could be quiet.

Bernie, he knew then, would never find him now. She might open the door, but even the light from the hall wouldn't reach him back here. And she sure wouldn't come in, not with that dress on. He giggled, and quickly covered his mouth. He didn't know her very well, only the two other times he'd been over when she'd sat with Jeremy, but he knew she wouldn't want to dirty that dress. She was very careful about it. He could see that. He could see how she stayed away from the walls, and held the skirt away from anything that might touch it and make it dirty.

She was weird, and not even Jeremy could tell him he was wrong. Weird, and always looking at them as if they were bugs or something. Sometimes she was fun, like with the spooky stories she'd tell them, but most of the time she just sat on the bench in the den and watched them. Like a guard. Like a dog. Until Mr. and Mrs. Kneale came home, and then she would put on her coat and leave without even saying goodnight.

Weird.

Really weird.

And a *scratching* in the corner.

A laugh outside as Stacey ran down the hall, telling his two friends he was caught but don't give up, Bernie was a jerk, and they'd share the chocolate later.

Will smiled and nodded to himself. One down, one to go. All she had to do was find Jeremy and the game was all his. All that candy, all his.

His stomach growled.

Something scratched lightly in the corner, and he wished there wasn't such a draft in here, tickling his neck and making him think there was something crawling through his hair. The wind outside had found a hole in the walls, had snuck around the window, and now he was getting cold and the clothes were moving and rustling together, whispering to each and scratching.

are you afraid of the dark?

A monster, he thought then, and squeezed his eyes closed, grateful for the colored lights that swirled in small circles and the curtains of faint orange that drifted down from the top, disappeared and came back; there was a monster in the closet.

He shifted, and heard someone walking the hall outside the door.

Bernie, he called silently, go find Jeremy, I'm not here.

A monster in with him, but the candy bars were huge and all he had to do was wait until his best friend was found.

A coat hanger scraped on the metal pole overhead.

Besides, there's no such things as monsters and I will not be afraid because I am hungry and I want that candy, he thought, his hands tight in fists, his eyes still closed.

Something thumped against the golf bag, and the clubs inside rattled.

No such thing. No such thing.

The bag quivered again, and he felt a weight press against the sole of his sneaker. And he sighed his relief, grinned and shook his head at how stupid he could be. It had been his foot all the time. He had unthinkingly stretched a leg out and had kicked the bag with his foot, so there was nothing to worry about, alone here in the dark.

scratching

Then he heard Jeremy running, probably from his bedroom, not the cellar after all, telling Will it was over, that he'd won the first game.

He sighed again, loudly, and nodded. He knew he would win. How could they have thought otherwise? Wasn't he the champion hide-and-seeker in the whole school, if not the whole entire world? Couldn't he do something wrong and then hide from his parents until they were nearly frantic with fear until he popped out and smiled and they forgot they were angry?

Shit, he was the champ. Bernie should have known.

A footstep by the door.

And a *scratching* inside.

He grinned and shifted, and took hold of the bag.

Someone turned the lock . . . turned and lock and walked away. "Hey," he said. "Hey, Bernie, it's me!"

And he pushed the bag aside, and saw the red eyes staring at him.

The candy bars sat in the middle of the table, and Stacey stood as close as he dared, one eye on Bernie fussing with the logs in the fireplace, the other on the reward he would win the next time. Had Jeremy been last, it would have been different because Jerry was okay. But Will was a p-i-g hog and he didn't think he could stand sitting here watching that pig scoff down all that chocolate.

Bernie rose and dusted her hands on the apron she wore around her waist.

Stacey decided he would win the next one, and let Jerry have the last.

At least that way, Will-the-pig wouldn't hog it all and make them look stupid besides.

"Are you ready?" she asked, standing on the hearth.

Jeremy looked toward the stairs that led to the first floor. "But we can't," he said. "We gotta wait for Will."

"The hell with Will," Stacey said with a sneer. "He's got his dumb candy, how he's just playing. We oughta let him stay wherever he is all night."

"That's not fair!"

"If that's the way Will wants it," Bernie said softly, "then that's the way he'll have it. If he's not back before we finish the next game, he'll forfeit his prize."

"Yeah!" Stacey said. "Way t'go, Bernie."

She smiled briefly, and he smiled back. She was really queer, but she had bigger tits even than his mother, and he didn't think she knew that he'd been trying to look down her dress all night. He'd whispered that to Jerry while they were waiting for Will, and the dip had blushed. He really had blushed. Stacey figured the kid didn't know anything about women, and wasn't surprised. His old man was the strictest parent in the world, and wouldn't even let him look at photography magazines. That was dumb. That was really and truly dumb.

"So," he said, "when do we start?"

"Stace . . ."

"Aw, c'mon, huh? They're gonna be back soon. We gotta get a move on."

"Stacey's right," Bernie said. She reached into the apron pocket, then, and pulled out something wrapped in white cloth. Slowly, she pulled the corners aside, and he saw in her palm a massive red jewel. It caught the dim light and doubled it, seemed to quiver when thunder rumbled through the room.

"Wow," he said.

"This," she said, "was taken from a very rich man. He has the police looking for it. He's given them one hour to find it or else." She smiled without showing her teeth. "We're going to play."

cops and robbers

Stacey knew he had made a mistake. He should have found some place inside to hide the jewel, but had convinced himself that Jerry would have found it in less than ten minutes. After all, it was his house, and he knew all the good places where such a thing could be hidden.

But this was silly.

He stood on the patio, the wind tearing at his hair and lashing it in his face, making him squint, hunching his shoulders, making his arms tremble as he considered digging a hole in one of the potted plants and burying it there.

No. Once Jerry knew he'd left the house, that would be the first place he'd look. And there wasn't time to dig a hole in the yard because the ground was still hard and he didn't have any tools.

Dumb, Parsons, he told himself when the wind turned him around. Really and truly dumb.

Then a streak of cloud-smothered lightning illuminated the backyard, and he grinned so hard his cheeks began to ache.

The well. That stupid plaster well Mrs. Kneale had bought last summer. They were forbidden to go near it, to touch, even to breathe on it, which didn't bother him because he thought it was stupid. What good was a well when it didn't go anywhere? All Mr. Kneale had done was take it out of the station wagon with Jerry and his help, and carried it to the yard, plunked it down, and got himself a beer to celebrate. Mrs. Kneale had applauded like they'd moved the stupid damn Empire State Building, and after that she and Jerry's father would sit on the patio and toss pennies at it, making wishes. She'd wanted Stacey to do it once, and he did because Jerry was his friend, but he'd felt dumb and he made Jerry swear later he wouldn't tell a soul.

Then, in August, he'd had an idea.

Mr. Kneale was getting pretty good at pitching the coins in; he could even do it most times with his eyes closed. So one night, when they were supposed to have been over at Will's, they snuck through the hole in the hedge and moved the well over. Just a few inches, not enough to notice.

Mr. Kneale missed, moved his chair, and recovered his aim.

They moved the well again, back where it was, and sat on the other side of the hedge in Will's yard and laughed themselves into hiccups when they heard the guy swearing.

They managed it twice more, until the night Jerry slipped on the damp grass and the well landed hard. One side cracked. A small split they didn't think anyone would notice.

Mrs. Kneale did, and that stupid Jerry broke the minute she asked him if they'd been fooling around.

Stupidass Jerry. Him and his stupidass books and his posters and not even knowing what Bernie looked like without her clothes. Damn, but they'd gotten into a hell of a lot of trouble, especially when Stacey had

let slip a fuck-word when his mother grabbed for his arm. Christ, that had put him in his room for a whole goddamned week.

The well, then. Jerry was still too scared to go near it, and wouldn't dream that his old pal still had the nerve.

He hurried off the patio onto the grass, crouched over and running on his toes, stopping once when lightning put a shadow in front of him and it took him a moment to realize it was his own. A look back over his shoulder, the draperies were still closed, and he dove around the side of the well, out of the wind.

Buried lightning again, and the mutter of thunder, and he whirled around when he thought he heard something coming through the hedge.

Nothing. It was nothing.

The leaves husked and branches rattled, and grass crawled toward his legs, and all the houses he could see were perfectly dark. Holes in the night; mouths of black monsters that ate people after sunset.

"Fuck," he said into the wind. It made him feel better, because the wind was getting on his nerves. "Fuck, shit, damn, hell." He smiled, and pulled the ruby out of his pocket, lifted his hand to drop it in the well when he stopped; frowned, and wondered just how stupid dumb Jerry really was. He just might think of the well, he just might, and if he looked inside with a flashlight he'd see it right away and get all the chocolate. Worse; he'd brag about it to every kid in the school, every day for a goddamned year. Worse yet, he'd prove he was such a good little boy that his parents would lift the grounding, and leave Stacey stuck in his room.

What he had to do then was think like a robber, a crook who was going to come back real soon and take the loot and run away once the cops had been by. He nodded to himself, looked back to the toolshed and knew that was too obvious. If he was going to hide it out here, then, he would have to put it in the well, but cover it with something. Grass, maybe some dirt, so the light wouldn't shine off it.

Suddenly, lightning sheered out of the clouds, ripping a hole in the night like a sheet tearing in half. He jumped and clutched the jewel to his stomach, closed his eyes and waited for the thunder.

When it came, cracking the air and smashing over his head, his ears stoppered, and he yelled, jumped to his feet and stared wide-eyed at the house.

This was nuts. He was going to fry out here, all for a stupid piece of chocolate.

Then he put a hand on the plaster lip and looked into the well. And blinked.

The edge only came to his waist, but it looked like it dropped a hundred miles into the ground. Maybe even a million. Mr. Kneale must've dug a hole under it, to pretend it was real and keep them from playing their trick on him again. He smiled; it was perfect. And he leaned over, reached out his hand, and when lightning flared again he could see all the way to the bottom. To the grass. To the lousy damned grass.

"Well, shit," he said, and without wasting any more time, he hitched himself onto the lip and dropped in.

The wind passing over the mouth sounded like hollow trumpets, and the sides quivered, the peaked roof shook, and the plastic bucket on the chain rocked alarmingly fast. It was a tight fit, but he had plenty of room to dig a small hole between his shoes with his fingers, place the jewel carefully inside and cover it again. Then he waited for the next bolt to be sure his work couldn't be seen.

When it came, he saw the water, and couldn't stop himself from falling toward the red eyes floating toward him.

This isn't funny any more, Jeremy thought, but he didn't have the nerve to leave the deacon's bench and complain. Bernie was in the kitchen again, making something on the stove, rattling pans and banging spoons and whistling so far off-key the noise scraped his spine like claws on a blackboard.

This isn't fun.

He looked over his shoulder, out the window to the yard that flicked in and out of his vision, white, black, white again and jumping over the well in the center. He had thoughts, a few minutes ago, that he'd seen Stacey creeping around there, but when the lightning came again and there was nothing to see, he changed his mind. Stacey was crazy, but not crazy enough for that.

His tongue touched his upper lip.

His left foot tapped on the floor.

He looked to the stairwell when he thought he heard Will, then looked to the back door when he thought he heard Stace.

Then the kitchen door slammed open, and Bernie walked in.

He blinked, and tried to smile, but there was an ice cube settling on the back of his neck, and it grew when he heard the first spattering of rain on the window.

Bernie sat in his father's chair by the fireplace and looked at the charred logs, raised her head and smiled straight at him. Her face was in partial shadow, and he could see only one eye, only one part of the mouth, only a few of her teeth.

"Are you worried about your friends?"

He nodded, and swallowed because he thought he was going to break down and cry, and that was the one thing he'd promised himself he'd never do again. All it ever did was get a slap from his father, or a shout from his mother—act your age, Jeremy Kneale, you're not a baby any more.

"I wouldn't," she whispered. "They're doing just fine."

"How do you know?" he said, more angrily than he'd intended. "All you do is make that stupid popcorn. Will is hurt somewhere, I just know it. And Stacey must be out there in all that rain." He rose and stood in front of her, hands clenched at his sides, fighting the burning that flushed his cheeks. "You don't care. You just want to get us in trouble again, that's all. Our folks are gonna come home, and we're gonna get in the biggest trouble in the world."

Bernie clasped her hands in her lap and watched the logs again, as if they were burning. "Jeremy, do you know what bog butter is?"

He frowned, looked away, looked back. "What?"

"It's our game, Jeremy. Surely you haven't forgotten the third game. Now answer my question: Have you ever heard of bog butter?"

"I . . ." He felt a tear in his right eye, a lump of coal in his throat. "Huh?"

She smiled dreamily, and sighed. "In the old days, long before there was even a United States, they used to bury people in marshes over in England. You know what a marsh is?"

He nodded.

The rain slapped at the pane, ran over the edge of the gutter and poured into the shrubs cringing under the window.

"Well, sometimes, when they dug these people up, they found that the bodies had oozed a kind of wax over themselves. It looked a little like butter, I guess, so they called it bog butter."

"That's nice," he said, knowing it sounded stupid, but what else could he say? His friends were lost in the storm and in the house, and Bernie was sitting in his father's chair talking about dead bodies and butter and god!, he wished she'd shut up so he could talk to her.

"At the time, of course, they didn't know what has caused it, or why it was there."

He edged away, his head ducking, his hips turning before he did. And when she didn't seem to notice, he backed up to the staircase, then flung himself up, racing down the hall to his room on the far end. He checked under the bed, in his closet, under his desk, in the toy chest. He looked out the window and saw nothing but the rain.

He ducked into his parents' room, and looked in everything that could

have held Will, and everything that couldn't, not caring that they'd find out when they saw the mess he made.

The guest room was just as empty.

"Will?"

The bathroom echoed thunder.

"Will!"

He was sweating now, and he couldn't stop his fingers from snapping, couldn't stop his lips from moving as if he were talking to himself. He checked the hall closet, but it was locked. He shook the door as hard as he could, then turned the bolt over and reached in for the string that snapped on the light.

Something fell against his legs, and he jumped back, yelping, then scowling at an empty shoebox that had dropped from the high shelf.

When he turned the light on, he saw nothing, not even when he crammed himself in and pushed everything aside that he could move, or kick, or butt with his hips.

Will wasn't there.

He stood in the middle of the hall, turning in a tight circle and yanking his head away from the lightning.

"Will, where *are* you?"

In the bathroom, a faucet began dripping.

"Will!"

Downstairs, then, into the living room, the dining room, the coat closet, the pantry.

He raced through the den, and heard Bernadette still talking about corpses in old England.

He flung open the front door and stood in the rain, not caring how wet he was getting, just hoping to catch a glimpse of Stacey returning with fat Will in tow. He ran around the house and screamed over the storm into the shrubbery, into the garage, into hedging that whipped at his arms and drew blood on his cheek.

"Stacey!" A cry more than a shout.

"Will!" Begging more than demanding.

There was no one in the tool shed, no one in the well.

He plunged back inside and stood by the table.

"Bernie."

She sighed, lightning flared, and the lamp flickered out.

"Bernie, answer me!"

He swung his arm and knocked over the bowl of popcorn. He kicked the table's near leg and toppled the glasses of soda. He picked up a chocolate bar and flung it at the hearth.

"Bernie, dammit!"

"Now that," she said, "is one of the things your father objects to. That kind of language."

"But—"

"And not paying attention. He said—they all said—none of you pay the slightest attention to them." She turned her head; he could see it moving though he couldn't see her eyes. "I could see that the first time I came here. And I could see something else, something rather sad, when you think about it a bit."

He shook his head and felt the water scattering across the room. "I don't give a damn about them now," he said, grabbing the cardtable by its edges and tipping it to the floor. "I want to know what you did with Will and Stacey!"

"You see, Jeremy, there are some people who just aren't cut out to be parents. They haven't the innate skills, or the temperament for it. Soon enough, they learn that children aren't pets, they're real human beings, and that's quite a revelation, don't you think? That children are human beings?"

He started to cry. He couldn't help it. Frustration at her refusal to respond made him so angry he couldn't stop the tears, or the way his legs stiffened as he kicked aside the wreckage and started to walk toward her.

"You, of course, didn't help very much," she said in light scolding.

"Bernie, please!"

"So your father found someone who knew me. And I came to help them get over their problem."

He stopped.

He could hear the soft whisper of Bernie's dress as she pushed out of the chair; he could hear the moist rattling of her breath in her throat; he could hear the odd way her feet struck the carpet as she walked over to meet him.

"Now, do you remember what I said about bog butter, Jeremy?"

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and screamed, "I don't care!"

"Ah, but you should, dear, you should."

There was lightning, and he gasped.

"They thought, you see, it was a curious little by-product of decomposition."

There was thunder, and the lamp flickered.

"It isn't, you know."

The lamp steadied, and he saw her, saw her soft silken dress and her

soft silken hair and the glistening yellow wax that covered her soft silken arms.

“It’s protection, my love.”

He backed away, and screamed.

The lamp sizzled and went out.

“It keeps us alive. So we can help those who need us.” She laughed then, and moved closer. “Now what are you afraid of, dear Jeremy my love. Why don’t you tell me so I can show you what it’s like.”

Catch Your Death

John Gordon

One of the chief joys for any horror enthusiast lies in discovering a new writer. On the advice of Rosemary Pardoe, I hunted through the children's books section of Foyle's to find a book entitled Catch Your Death and Other Ghost Stories crammed in beside books about Fluffy the Bunny and the like. While the characters in these stories are often adolescents, there is nothing childish about John Gordon's fiction. This is one of the finest collections of horror stories in many years.

John Gordon was born in the North of England, the son of a teacher. His family moved South in the Depression of the 1930s, and he was educated at a Grammar School in East Anglia before joining the Navy in 1943. After the war he became a journalist and worked on a number of newspapers. He is now a full-time writer. Gordon is married and has two grown-up children. He enjoys music and walking. His books include The Giant Under the Snow, The House on the Brink, The Ghost on the Hill, Waterfall Box, The Spitfire Grave, and The Edge of The World, and he has published many short stories.

"I SEEN IT."

"Ya never."

"It were bigger'n me. Bigger'n you. Bigger'n her, an' all."

"Bigger'n Sally? She's only little, your little sister is."

Ron Stibbard's head jutted forward. "I'll give you a crack acrost the skull if you don't shut up. It were bigger'n all three on us put together. It were huge."

"I should think it was huge, then." Wayne Spencer had his arms spread as though he was about to fight or fly; it didn't matter to him which it was. He had taken off his anorak and tied the sleeves round his middle so that it hung behind him like an apron in reverse. "It must have been huger than anything I ever seen. Huger than anything anybody ever seen, I reckon. Hi, Miss!"

He spun away, and Ron and Sally watched him barge into backs,

fronts, shoulders, anything in the way of his elbows as he ran up the slope of the playground toward the teacher. Miss Birdsall was looking out to sea across the rooftops, the winter mist in her eyes.

"What's he going to do?" said Sally and put her hand in her brother's coat pocket where he felt it stirring like a little mouse. It said more than her voice did. She was frightened.

"It don't matter what he do. We seen it."

"Hi, Miss." Wayne's shout reached them down the slope. "Ron Stibbard reckon he have seen something in the lane."

Miss Birdsall's gaze came slowly back from the smooth roll of the sea under the mist, crossed the slate roofs, drifted in over the railings and fluttered to rest on Wayne. "What has he seen?" she said. "And there's no need to shout."

It had no effect; they could still hear him. "He have seen a big black dog, Miss. Bigger'n him himself, and me, both on us together. What do you reckon, Miss?"

Her smile seemed to have a pale color, something like the blue of her eyes. "I should think he's seen a big black dog," she said. "Did it bite him?"

"It don't have to bite him, Miss. Not if it's Black Shuck. You only have to see it and you die."

In the long lane along the cliff the boy's voice was no more than a gull's call. A shadow shifted in the hedge. Brown eyes blinked.

I hang in the hedge, a scatter of shadows. I am dog-shape and pad these long lanes. I am Death-Bringer.

"I had that liver for me lunch. You know I did, dear." Mrs. Birdsall always held a little handkerchief, and now, as she gazed up at her daughter, she teased it between her fingers. "I warmed it up, just like you told me, Mary. That and a few veggies, which I done meself."

"I meant it for supper, Mother. There was enough for both of us." Mary Birdsall's soft voice had no more rise and fall to it than the sea shushing against the beach at the end of the road. She gazed vacantly into the red glow of the fire. The little parlor was almost in darkness, and for a long moment the only sound was the ticking of the big clock on the mantel. She turned a sigh into a deep breath, but her mother was not deceived.

"You didn't want me to go hungry, Mary, did you?" The handkerchief was stretched like a drumskin. "An' you know very well you left it on the shelf for me. Why was it there if it wasn't for me?"

"There was some cold meat, Mother. And a salad. Surely you saw them."

There was a silence in which the handkerchief was pulled from hand to hand until it nearly tore.

"You did see it, Mother?"

The handkerchief was screwed up suddenly and raised to the corner of an eye.

"You didn't eat that, too, did you?"

"It were so little, Mary. It weren't hardly filling." Her voice was a whine from the deep chair by the fireside. "And me legs have been playing me up so terrible. I can't hardly move. I've had an awful afternoon, awful. I been feeling so terrible I almost got someone to run up to the school and fetch you. But I know you don't like being interrupted, Mary."

"Mother!" Mary Birdsall took a step nearer the short, plump figure that reclined in the low chair with both legs resting on a stool. "You know that's not true. If you're really bad you've got to send for me."

The head with the tousled thin hair was turned away and the screwed-up handkerchief was pressed to the base of the nose. "I'm a martyr to me legs, Mary. You know I am. I was just starting the washing-up when it struck. I was right against the kitchen sink, and I had to cling there for I don't know how long. How I ever got back into this room I shall never know."

"How are you now, Mother?" Mary Birdsall put the bag she was carrying down on the floor and reached for the free hand that her mother had conveniently left lying limply on the chair arm. "Are you better?"

The hand, surprisingly thin and damp, clutched feverishly at hers. "I can manage. You don't need to worry about me, dear." In the dim light of the dying fire, the liquid in her eyes glowed bravely. "I ain't intending to go just yet. I think I've got a few years left to me."

"Of course you have, Mother."

Quite suddenly, energetically, old Mrs. Birdsall was elbowing herself upright. The gleam of her eyes had caught sight of Mary's shopping-bag.

"So you got something for us after all, did you, Mary? I knew that liver wasn't for supper. There weren't hardly enough. What did you get?"

Mary Birdsall's mild eyes glazed at the wrinkled face as the stooped figure got to its feet.

"There's nothing wrong with your legs, now, Mother."

"I been resting them. They'll be all right for a minute. What was it you fetched?"

"I came straight from school. I haven't been to the shop." Mary picked up the bag and with the first precise action she had made since coming

into the room, she began placing its contents on the table. "Schoolbooks, Mother. I've got some marking to do tonight."

"What's the use o' them?" The old mouth turned down at the corners and the rounded shoulders swung away from her daughter as Mrs. Birdsall shuffled toward the door in the corner.

"If you get the washing-up done, Mother, I'll just go and get something from the shop."

"I got to pay a call."

Mary Birdsall heard the bathroom latch rattle and the door shut.

"Ron." Sally had to take a step and a half to each stride of her brother's to keep up with him. "It isn't true what he said about our dog, is it?"

She spoke very carefully because she had a lisp, so he knew what she was saying before she had finished, but even then she had to wait several paces before he replied.

"It ain't our dog."

"Well it nearly is. It comes to see us, and it don't bark."

"You heard what Miss said. She said Black Shuck were just a story, so it can't be Black Shuck or we'd be dead, both of us."

"We even patted it." Her voice faded to a whisper as the thought widened her eyes. He felt her hand reach into his anorak pocket and he put his own hand in beside it. She gripped his fingers.

"You got nothing to worry about, Sally," he said, but he brought them both to a halt in the center of the lane and they turned to look back. They could see the school against the gray sky, but most of the village was hidden in the dip of the cliffs. "I was just wonderin'," he said, "if Wayne was tagging along behind us." The tarmac strip of the lane, wet with the mist creeping in from the sea, gleamed emptily. "But there ain't a smell of him. I might have known he'd be chicken."

"I'm scared." Her voice was still very small. "I don't want to be dead."

The cliffs were not high and the sound of the waves reached them, clapping down on the beach like falling gravestones. His courage almost flew from him and his grip on her hand tightened so hard she was startled. To disguise it he began to run, tugging her with him, leaving the village behind.

I am unseen. My black tongue lolls like winter leaves. That pebble-glint is my eye, that bent stick my leg. Death is never far.

It is centuries since I leapt for the shore across ice-gleam of oar blades and through hail hiss in sea spume. Icicles rattled in my pelt as I leapt, first foot on this shore.

The tang of the sharp still touches my tongue, and I hear the song they sang as fierce forks of flame thrust through thatch and wooden walls. Then they bawled in their beer, bragged of battle; blades shone as they shouted and haled their hell-hound. I ran on before them, and death followed my swift feet; of that their sharp swords made sure.

The two women in the shop watched Mary Birdsall as she went out. "I know where she's off to now," said one, and they both laughed.

Behind the counter, Mrs. Groves said, "Well you can't blame her, not with a mother like that. I never see that old woman but what she's grumbling about this or complaining about that."

"I never do see her nowadays," said the woman with the wire basket lifting her purchases from it and putting them on the counter. "Not that I want to. But they do say she have bad legs and can't get about."

"Bad legs!" The shopkeeper knew better. "I'll tell you one thing, Mrs. Spencer, her legs is good enough to get up here every single afternoon." She nodded and pursed her lips. "No sooner does that school bell go to call the children in after dinner than she comes trotting up the road as fast as you like."

"She don't!" But Mrs. Spencer believed it. "Where do she go?"

"Here, of course. She sneaks in here and closes the door ever so softly as though Mary could hear her. That's what she's afraid of; Mary finding out. And that's why she waits until Mary's safely back in school. And you know why?"

"No I don't, Mrs. Groves." The tins and packets from the wire basket were laid out between them waiting to be rung up on the till. "I've no idea."

"Chocolate." Mrs. Groves raised her eyebrows and her chin and watched through her glasses until the word had made its impact. "Chocolate. Mars Bars. Marathons. Galaxies. It don't matter to her what they are. 'Give me one o' them,' she say, and point to it. And then she digs in her purse and thinks a bit, and says, 'And one o' them others. I'm that starved,' she say, 'Mary hardly left me nothin.'"

"Well, you surprise me. My Wayne say she's ever so kind, and so do all the children. I never knew Mary Birdsall was like that."

"She's not. Oh no." Mrs. Groves had pursed her lips again and was shaking her head. "You know as well as I do, Mrs. Spencer, that Mary is generous to a fault. There ain't a kinder person in the whole village. And I am the one who should know best of all. The food she buys here you would not believe."

"Well, it can't be for herself. She's hardly got any flesh on her." Mrs.

Spencer was looking out through the shop window, a faint smile on her mouth and her eyes glinting with interest at what she saw. "There she goes now; what did I tell you?"

The shopkeeper leaned over the counter to look around a pile of tins. "It's the same every time. She did not have to speak loudly because her head was very close to Mrs. Spencer's. "It's a wonder people don't start talking."

"They do say," Mrs. Spencer began and then broke off as the two women watched Mary hesitate in front of the little bank at the corner. A light glowed in the corn merchant's office above it, but the bank's own windows were shuttered. "There she goes." They saw Mary step across the pavement and push open the door. "And that bank's supposed to be closed," said Mrs. Spencer, and both women laughed. "Closed to everybody but Mary Birdsall, that is."

"Well, you can't blame her."

"You've got to take your pleasures when you can and wherever you can, but a bank's a funny place for it." They laughed again. "Not that Mary minds, I dare say. He ain't a bad looking feller for a bank manager."

"They won't have long," said the shopkeeper. "She'll have to get home with that ham for her mother's tea."

"I'd give her ham, the way she's treated that girl. They'd be married now if it wasn't for that old woman. Made such a fuss when Mary mentioned it."

The shopkeeper was nodding her head, agreeing. "Wasn't going to be left on her own, wasn't going to move, didn't want anybody else in the house. I know what I'd have told her."

"But you're not Mary, Mrs. Groves."

"Indeed I am not."

They watched through the window as the bank door opened and the teacher disappeared inside.

"Poor Mary," said Mrs. Spencer. "She can't stand up to her mother. Never could."

In the lane the two children stopped running.

"It ain't no good," said Ron. "He ain't coming, not today."

"I don't mind," said Sally.

"You ain't afraid of dyin' are you?"

"Not after what Miss Mary Birdsall said, I ain't. It was that Wayne. He made me frit."

Ron gave her hand a jerk of annoyance and imitated her lisp. "Miss Mary Birdsall. You don't say a teacher's whole name when you talk about her. She's just Miss."

"But I like Miss Mary Birdsall. She ain't very happy."

"She ain't supposed to be happy, is she? She's a teacher."

"She have sad eyes. She would cry if anything was to happen to us."

"I should think everybody would." They stood together, hand in hand, and looked out over the low cliff. "They wouldn't like it if two kids was to die."

They listened to the mournful suck of the sea below and for a moment felt the lonely luxury of slipping out of the world.

"I seen her crying once, Ron. She come out of her house and she could hardly see me her eyes was so brimful. And you know what she done?"

"How do I know? I wasn't there was I?"

"She picked me up and kissed me. She almost squeezed the life out of me. Why do you reckon she done that when she was crying?" Ron shrugged and did not answer. "Anyway, that's why I like Miss Mary Birdsall."

Her brother listened for a few seconds to the dull clap of the waves then said, "Anyway she put that Wayne in his place when he was going on about Old Shuck didn't she? She say that black dogs sometimes bring good luck. If they're ghosts, that is."

"Our dog ain't a ghost, though."

I listen. In the field's dark furrows my pelt is invisible. Their fingers have felt my coat and tugged at my neck. They have dealt with the Death-Dealer and there is no going back.

A single light in a green shade shone over his desk in the back, but they stood at a little distance and in shadow near the counter where all day he had been counting money to and fro through the brass grille.

"For ever, Mary? Does this go on for ever?" He had drawn away from her, and his hand rested on the counter as though waiting for some document in a transaction. "Our lives are running away."

She knew that. Daily, in the mirror, she had seen the dark shadow under her eyes increasing and the edge of her lips beginning to blur with tiny wrinkles. "Even my clothes." Her thoughts burst into words that were almost a cry. "Look at me. Jumper and skirt. Every day the same. Oh!"

"Mary," he said. At one time, when he spoke as softly as now, he would have reached for her and, clinging together, they would have ridden out the anguish. But this time he had made no move. "She's got to let you go. You've got to leave her."

"I can't!"

He was a quiet man. The thin brown face, handsome at most times,

was hollowed now into angular shapes. "She uses you. She's taking your life away, can't you see that?"

"If only you could begin to like her."

He drew in his breath. "She won't even see me, Mary. How many more times do we try?"

"But . . ." And then she looked down. They had each rested a hand on the counter, but their fingers were curled, not touching. There was a space of polished wood between them and she could not cross it. All she could do was slide her hand back. She did so and turned away. "She relies on me. I can't leave her."

Seen through the moisture of her eyes the floor was uncertain and she almost stumbled. He saw the awkwardness in her, but desperation gave him grim cruelty and he let her open the door and go out without calling her back.

Mrs. Groves pressed the keys on her cash register and watched the little electronic figures flicker, doing her sums for her. It's a boon, she thought for the millionth time; I would have thought this was magic when I was at school.

"There she goes." Mrs. Spencer had seen Mary coming out of the bank, and was simpering slyly at the thought of what had been happening inside. "That never took long."

Mrs. Groves took her eyes from the magic figures. "She do have her head bowed low, don't she?"

Mary went by as though rain was beating into her face, and the smile faded on Mrs. Spencer's lips. "She's crying, that's what she's doing. What have he said to her? What have he done?"

They watched her go by without being properly able to glimpse her face, then the shopkeeper said, "Well at least she's going home and not the other way."

"What do you mean, Mrs. Groves?"

"I've seen that girl looking so miserable at times," Mrs. Groves was shaking her head, "that when she wanders down toward the sea I wonder whether she isn't going to do something really silly."

The lane along the cliff bent away out of sight, and the thin sea mist put cold hands to their cheeks and foreheads.

"There ain't much point in going no further," said Ron. "He ain't coming to see us today." His sister's fingers lay quite still inside his hand in his pocket, and for some time she had walked steadily in silence. He glanced sideways and saw that her face was serious. Her small legs must

be getting tired. "I reckon we've gone far enough, Sally. Time we went back."

"I was thinking about Miss Mary Birdsall," she said.

Her lisp made him tighten his fingers over hers. He wanted to protect her. "What about her?" he said.

"She's so sad I wondered if we could do something to cheer her up."

"What, for instance?"

Her little shoulders rose and fell in a quick shrug. "I don't know."

"Come on, we've got to get back." He turned in the road and the faint breeze pushed droplets into his face that thickened and made him blink just as Sally gripped his hand, tugged it from his pocket and began to drag him forward.

"There he is!" she cried. "I knew he'd come for us."

They had descended a slope to where the clifftop almost touched the beach. Now, as they looked up, they saw the shape on the skyline.

I stand between dull sea silver and the black bank. They see me. Their home hearth is at my back. The one track brings them to my muzzle.

Sally slipped his hand and ran forward. He had not realized the dog was so large. She had to reach above her head to put her arms around its neck.

"He's wet," she said. "He's ever so wet on my face. Look." She turned toward him, rubbing her cheeks in the dog's pelt to pick up the beads of mist hanging there. Her face shone in the pale light as she laughed, and the dog lowered its mask to be level with her, but kept its eyes on the boy.

Her brother's footsteps faltered and she called out, "Hurry up, Ron, we've got to do something."

"What?" He came forward slowly and stood in front of them. The dog's breath smoked across his sister's face, and he wanted to reach forward and coax her fingers from the long hair of its neck, but the brown eyes set deep in the black skull made him, for the first time, afraid. "What have we got to do?"

"Get hold of him, Ron, like I am." She saw him hesitate. "You don't have to be frightened."

Shame at being less daring than his sister made him put his hand forward and touch the dog between the ears. He felt the heavy bone and dug his fingers into the thick hair behind its head.

"It's cold," he said. "Cold all the way inside."

She nodded. Her face was gleaming. "Do you know what I think we

should do?" she asked. He shook his head. "I think we should take the dog to see Miss Mary Birdsall."

The dog's tongue lolled over its black lips and its teeth showed, but it was docile between them and Ron's courage returned.

"It could get warm beside her fire," he said. "She'd like that." But it was the thought of walking through the village street and Wayne Spencer seeing him with the big black shape at his side that was strongest in his mind.

The dog went with them. Sally was no taller than its head but she clung to the hair of its shoulder as though at a tug she could force it to go in any direction she demanded. And all the time she chattered.

"Miss Mary Birdsall will be ever so pleased, Ron. It will make her happy. I know it will. She might be able to keep it." She leant forward as she walked, and looked into its face. "Would you like that? She'll give you a name, I reckon, if you haven't got one. You'd like a name, I expect."

Names made her brother uncomfortable. "Why don't you be quiet?" he said.

Night was coming on fast, and as they entered the village the mist became a drizzle which dissolved the outlines of the houses. Suddenly he no longer wanted to be with the dog that padded between them. "Let it go," he said. "Send it back."

"No!" She raised her voice. "I like him. He's Old Shuck."

"Don't say that!" He had thrust his head forward, turning to say more, but his words were choked off as the dog stopped suddenly and raised its head.

It was then that they heard the footsteps. Coming along the street, one hand holding her coat collar closed against the drizzle, was the teacher.

Sally tugged at the dog and tried to urge it forward. "Miss!" she called out. "Miss Mary Birdsall!"

Mary heard her just as she was about to turn into the gateway of her cottage. She paused, frowning slightly, not wanting her thoughts to be disturbed, but Sally called again and she took her hand from the latch.

"Sally," she said, surprised to see the two children. "And Ron Stibbard. You're soaking, the pair of you. You'd better get home and get those wet things off."

At the sound of her voice the dog moved forward and they went with it to stand in front of her. She looked down at them and they saw that the blue of her eyes seemed to have widened with the moisture on her face.

"Miss," said Sally, and fell silent, suddenly shy.

Ron had to speak. "We thought we'd like to give you something," he

said in a rush, and was going to go on, but the cottage door opened and distracted them.

"Mary!" The voice was peevish. "What you doing standing out there with them kids? I been waiting ages."

"Just a minute, Mother. They want to tell me something."

"Can't you see them in the morning? If I stand here any longer I'll catch me death." She turned her back and waddled inside.

It was then, with their hands resting on its back, that they felt the dog's pelt roughen. They glanced quickly down and saw its head lowered as though it was about to charge. They clenched their fingers in its stiff, black hair, half afraid it would turn on them, but it moved forward and slid easily from their grasp.

They watched it pad through the garden to the open door, push it wider as though it already belonged there, and disappear into the shadows inside. They were listening for a shriek of alarm or anger from the old woman but no sound came, and Mary's voice made them turn toward her, away from the blank doorway.

"You were going to tell me something," she said, and waited for an answer.

"It was only about the dog," said Ron.

"What dog?"

He opened his mouth to speak, but as he looked directly into her eyes he saw that she did not know what he meant. The huge dog had stood between them but she had not seen it.

It was Sally's lisp that broke the silence. "Miss Mary Birdsall," she said.

Mary could not prevent herself smiling at the small, solemn face turned up toward her. "Yes?" she said.

"We brought him along to see you so you wouldn't be sad."

"Who?"

"Old Shuck," said Sally.

Her brother was embarrassed and jerked at her hand to silence her. "It's nothing, Miss," he said, and began to retreat, pulling Sally with him.

Mary watched them turn away slowly and then, free of her, suddenly break into a run and disappear along the road, hand in hand.

I stand still in the room. Far outside, footsteps flee. They need not fear. I deal death where I will. I lift my muzzle and am door height. Fire-coal falls and flares, and in the heat of the hearth the old one watches. She sees. My pelt steams. In her face, fear flickers and I come closer. She feels my breath in her face, fails to fight free, and in a gasp is gone.

Dinner Party

Gardner Dozois

Gardner Dozois was born in 1947 in Salem, Massachusetts, where he grew up ice-skating on Gallows Hill. Now a resident of Philadelphia, Dozois is the author or editor of sixteen books, including the novel Strangers, and The Visible Man, a collection of his short fiction. He also edits the annual series, The Year's Best Science Fiction. His short fiction has appeared in Playboy, Penthouse, Omni, and a great many science fiction magazines and anthologies. His critical work has appeared in Writer's Digest, Starship, Thrust, Science Fiction Chronicle, Writing and Selling Science Fiction, and Science Fiction Writers, and he is the author of the critical chapbook, The Fiction of James Tiptree, Jr. His forthcoming books include The Year's Best Science Fiction, Second Annual Collection for Bluejay Books and a series of anthologies in collaboration with Jack Dann for Ace Books: Magicats, Mermaids, Bestiary, Sorcerers, and Demons.

Dozois often writes in collaboration with one or both of his friends Jack Dann and Michael Swanwick. A story by the three of them, "Touring," was featured in The Year's Best Horror Stories: Series X; one critic judged it to be the best story ever published in this series. However, Gardner Dozois can do quite well on his own, as this cheerful tale demonstrates.

IT HAD BEEN COLD all that afternoon. When they picked Hassmann up at the gate that evening it was worse than cold—it was freezing.

The gate guard let Hassmann wait inside the guard booth, although that was technically against regulations, and he might have caught hell for it if the Officer of the Day had come by. But it was colder than a witch's tit outside, as the guard put it, and he knew Hassmann slightly, and liked him, even though he was RA and Hassmann was National Guard, and he thought that most NGs were chickenshit. But he liked Hassmann. Hassmann was a good kid.

They huddled inside the guard booth, sharing a cigarette, talking desultorily about baseball and women, about a court-martial in the gate

guard's battalion, about the upcoming ATTs and MOS tests, about the scarcity of promotion slots for corporals and 5s. They carefully did not talk about the incident last weekend on the campus in Morgantown, although it had been all over the papers and the TV and had been talked about all over post. They also didn't talk about where Hassmann was going tonight—allowed offbase at a time when almost everyone else's passes had been pulled—although rumors about that had spread through the grapevine with telegraphic speed since Hassmann's interview with Captain Simes early that afternoon. Most especially, most emphatically, they did not talk about what everyone knew but hesitated to admit even in whispers: that by this time next month, they would probably be at war.

The gate guard was telling some long, rambling anecdote about breaking up a fight down behind the Armor mess hall when he looked out beyond Hassmann's shoulder and fell silent, his face changing. "This looks like your ride heah, Jackson," he said, quietly, after a pause.

Hassmann watched the car sweep in off the road and stop before the gate; it was a big black Caddy, the post floodlights gleaming from a crust of ice over polished steel and chrome. "Yeah," Hassmann said. His throat had suddenly turned dry, and his tongue bulked enormously in his mouth. He ground the cigarette butt out against the wall. The guard opened the door of the booth to let him out. The cold seized him with his first step outside, seized him and shook him like a dog shaking a rat. "Cover your ass," the gate guard said suddenly from the booth behind him. "Remember—cover your *own* ass, you heah?" Hassmann nodded, without looking around, without much conviction. The guard grunted, and slid the booth door closed.

Hassmann was alone.

He began to trot toward the car, slipping on a patch of ice, recovering easily. Hoarfrost glistened everywhere, over everything, and the stars were out in their chill armies, like the million icy eyes of God. The cold air was like ice in his lungs, and his breath steamed in white tatters around him. The driver of the car had the right front door half open, waiting for him, but Hassmann—seeing that the man had a woman with him, and feeling a surge of revulsion at the thought of sitting pressed close to the couple in the front—opened the rear door instead and slipped into the back seat. After a moment, the driver shrugged and closed the front door. Hassmann closed the rear door too, automatically pushed down the little button that locked it, instantly embarrassed that he had done so. After the double *thunk* of the doors closing and the sharp *click* of the lock, there was nothing but a smothering silence.

The driver turned around in his seat, resting his arm on the top of the seatback, staring at Hassmann. In the dark, it was hard to make out his features, but he was a big, beefy man, and Hassmann could see the reptilian glint of light from thick, horn-rimmed glasses. The woman was still facing forward, only casting a quick, furtive glance back at him, and then turning her head away again. Even in this half-light, Hassmann could see the stiffness of her shoulders, the taut way she held her neck. When the silence had become more than uncomfortable, Hassmann stammered, "Sir, I'm—sir, PFC Hassmann, sir . . ."

The driver shifted his weight in the front seat. Leather creaked and moaned. "Glad to meet you, son," he said. "Yes, very glad—a pleasure, yes, a pleasure." There was a forced joviality in his voice, a note of strained, dangerous cordiality that Hassmann decided he had better not try to argue with.

"Glad to meet you, too, sir," Hassmann croaked.

"Thank you, son," the man said. Leather groaned again as he extended his hand into the back seat. Hassmann shook it briefly, released it—the man's hand had been damp and flabby, like a rubber glove full of oatmeal. "I'm Dr. Wilkins," the man said. "And this is my wife, Fran." His wife did not acknowledge the introduction, continuing to stare stonily straight ahead. "Manners," Dr. Wilkins said in a soft, cottony voice, almost a whisper. "Manners!" Mrs. Wilkins jumped as if she had been slapped, and then dully muttered, "Charmed," still not turning to look at Hassmann.

Dr. Wilkins stared at his wife for a moment, then turned to look at Hassmann again; his glasses were dully gleaming blank circles, like opaque portholes. "What's your *Christian* name, son?"

Hassmann shifted uneasily in his seat. After a moment's hesitation—as though to speak his name would be to give the other man power over him—he said, "James, sir. James Hassmann."

"I'll call you Jim, then," Dr. Wilkins said. It was a statement of fact—he was not asking permission; nor was there any question that Hassmann would be expected to continue to call him "Dr. Wilkins," however free the older man made himself with Hassmann's "Christian name." Or "sir," Hassmann thought with a quick flash of resentment, you could hardly go wrong calling him "sir." Hassmann had been in the Army long enough to know that it was impossible to say "sir" too many times when you were talking to a man like this; work it in a hundred times per sentence, they'd like it just fine.

Dr. Wilkins was still staring reflectively at him, as if he expected some sort of response, an expression of gratitude for the fine democratic spirit

he was showing, perhaps . . . but Hassmann said nothing. Dr. Wilkins grunted. "Well, then—Jim," he said. "You like continental cuisine?"

"I—I'm not sure, sir," Hassmann said. He could feel his face flushing with embarrassment in the close darkness of the cab. "I'm not sure I know what it is."

Dr. Wilkins made a noise that was not quite a snort—a long, slow, resigned exhaling of air through the nose. "What kind of food do you like to eat at home?"

"Well, sir, the usual king of thing, I guess. Nothing special."

"What kind of things?" Dr. Wilkins said with heavy, elaborated patience.

"Oh—spaghetti, meat loaf. Sometimes fried chicken, or cold cuts. We had TV dinners a lot." Dr. Wilkins was staring at him; it was too dark to make out his expression with any kind of certainty, but he seemed to be staring blankly, incredulously, as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Sometimes my mother'd make, you know, a roast for Sunday or something, but she didn't like to cook anything fancy like that."

This time Dr. Wilkins did snort, a sharp, impatient sound. "*Adeo in teneris consuescere multum est*," he said in a loud, portentous voice, and shook his head. Hassmann felt his face burning again; he had no idea what Dr. Wilkins had said, but there was no mistaking the scorn behind the words. "That's Virgil," Dr. Wilkins said contemptuously, peering significantly at Hassmann. "You know Virgil?"

"Sir?" Hassmann said.

"Never mind," Dr. Wilkins muttered. After a heavy pause, he said, "This restaurant we're taking you to tonight has a three-star Michelin rating, one of the few places east of the Mississippi River that does, outside of New York City. I don't suppose that means anything to you, either, does it?"

"No, sir," Hassmann said stiffly. "I'm afraid it doesn't, sir."

Dr. Wilkins snorted again. Hassmann saw that Mrs. Wilkins was watching him in the rear view mirror, but as soon as their eyes met, she turned her face away.

"Well, son," Dr. Wilkins was saying, "I'll tell you *one* thing those three Michelin stars mean: they mean that tonight you're going to get the best damn meal you ever had." He sniffed derisively. "Maybe the best damn meal you'll *ever* have. Do you understand *that* . . . Jim?"

"Yes, sir," Hassmann said. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that Mrs. Wilkins was watching him in the rear view mirror again. Every time she thought that his attention was elsewhere, she would stare at him with terrible fixed intensity; she would look away when he met her

eyes in the mirror, but a moment later, as soon as he glanced away, she would be staring at him again, as though she couldn't keep her eyes off him, as though he were something loathsome and at the same time almost hypnotically fascinating, like a snake or a venomous insect.

"I don't expect you to appreciate the finer points," Dr. Wilkins said, "we can thank the way kids are brought up today for *that*, but I do expect you to appreciate that what you're getting tonight is a very fine meal, one of the finest meals money can buy, not some slop from McDonald's."

"Yes, sir, I do, sir," Hassmann said. Dr. Wilkins made a *humpfing* noise, not sounding entirely mollified, so Hassmann added, "It sounds great, sir. I'm really looking forward to it. Thank you, sir." He kept his face blank and his voice level, but his jaw ached with tension. He hated being dressed down like this, he *hated* it. His fingers were turning white where they were gripping the edge of the seat.

Dr. Wilkins stared at him for a moment longer, then sighed and turned back to the wheel; they slid away into the darkness with a smooth surge of acceleration.

They coasted back down the hill, turned right. Here the road ran parallel to the tall cyclone fence that surrounded the base; behind the iron mesh, behind the winter-striped skeletons of trees, Hassmann could see the high, cinder-bed roofs of the Infantry barracks, a huge water tower—it had the slogan RE-UP ARMY stenciled on its sides, visible for miles in the daytime—and the gaunt silhouette of a derrick, peaking up over the fence from the Engineer motor pool like the neck of some fantastic metal giraffe. The base dwindled behind them to a table-top miniature, to a scene the size of a landscape inside a tiny glass snowball, and then it was gone, and there was nothing but the stuffy interior of the car, the pale glow of the instruments on the dashboard, dark masses of trees rushing by on either side. Hassmann was sweating heavily, in spite of the cold, and the upholstery was sticky under his hands.

There was a faint but persistent scent of patchouli in the car—cutting across the new-car smell of the upholstery and the tobacco-and-English-Leather smell of Dr. Wilkins—that must be Mrs. Wilkins' perfume; it was a heavy, oversweet smell that reminded Hassmann of the room in the cancer hospital where his aunt had died. He longed to roll down the window, let the cold night air into the stuffy car, but he didn't quite dare to do it without asking Dr. Wilkins' permission, and that was something he wouldn't do. He was beginning to get a headache, a bright needle of pain that probed in alongside his eyeball like a stiff wire, and his stomach was sick and knotted with tension. Abruptly it was too much for him, and he found himself blinking back sudden tears of frustration and rage,

all the resentment and chagrin he felt rising up in his throat like bile. Why did he have to do this? Why did they have to pick on *him*? Why couldn't they just leave him *alone*? He had said as much in Captain Simes' office this afternoon, blurting out, "I don't want to do it! Do I *have* to go, sir?" And Captain Simes had studied him with jaundiced eye for a moment before replying, "Officially, no. The regulations say we can't make you. Unofficially, though, I can tell you that Dr. Wilkins is a very important man in this state, and with things as tense as they are politically, you can expect some very serious smoke to be brought down on your ass if you don't do everything you can to keep him happy, short of dropping your drawers and bending over." And then Simes had leered at him with his eroded, prematurely old face and said, "And, hell, soldier, comes right down to it, maybe you even ought to take *that* under advisement"

They drifted past a weathered wooden barn that was covered with faded old Clabber Girl and Jesus Saves signs, past a dilapidated farmhouse where one light was burning in an upstairs window. There was an automobile up on blocks in the snow-covered front yard, its engine hanging suspended from a rope thrown over a tree branch. Scattered automobile parts made hummocks in the snow, as if small dead animals were buried there. They turned past a bullet-riddled highway sign and onto an old state road that wound down out of the foothill country. The car began to pick up speed, swaying slightly on its suspension.

"You come from around here, Jim?" Dr. Wilkins said.

"No, sir," Hassmann said. *Thank God!* he added silently to himself. Evidently he had been unable to keep his feelings out of his voice, because Dr. Wilkins glanced quizzically at him in the rear view mirror. Quickly, Hassmann added, "I was born in Massachusetts, sir. A small town near Springfield."

"That so?" Dr. Wilkins said, without interest. "Gets pretty cold up there too in the winter, doesn't it? So at least you're used to this kind of weather, right?"

"That's right, sir," Hassmann said leadenly. "It gets pretty cold there, too."

Dr. Wilkins grunted. Even he seemed to realize that his attempt at small talk had been a dismal failure, for he lapsed into a sodden silence. He pressed down harder on the accelerator, and the dark winter countryside began to blur by outside the windows. Now that they had stopped talking, there was no sound except for the whine of the tires on macadam or their snaredrum rattle on patches of gravel.

Hassmann rubbed his sweating palms against the slick upholstery.

Somehow he knew that Mrs. Wilkins was watching him again, although it was too dark to see her eyes in the mirror any more. Occasionally the lights of an oncoming car would turn the inside of the windshield into a reflective surface, and he would be able to see her plainly for a second, a thin-faced woman with tightly pursed lips, her hands clenched together in her lap, staring rigidly straight ahead of her. Then the light would fade and her image would disappear, and only then, in the darkness, would he begin to *feel* her eyes watching him again, as though she were only able to see him in the dark

They were going faster and faster now, careening down the old state road like a moonshiner on a delivery run with the Alcohol Tax agents on his tail, and Hassmann was beginning to be afraid, although he did his best to sit still and look imperturbable. The old roadbed was only indifferently maintained, and every bump rattled their teeth in spite of the Caddy's heavy-duty shocks; once Hassmann was bounced high enough to bang his head on the roof, and the car was beginning to sway ominously from side to side. Fortunately, they were on a level stretch of road with no oncoming traffic with they hit the patch of ice. For a moment or two the Caddy was all over the road, skidding and fishtailing wildly, its brakes screaming and its tires throwing up clouds of black smoke, and then slowly, painfully, Dr. Wilkins brought the big car back under control. They never came to a complete stop, but they had slowed down to about fifteen miles per hour by the time Dr. Wilkins could wrestle them back into their own lane, and you could smell burned rubber even inside the closed cab.

No one spoke; Mrs. Wilkins had not even moved, except to steady herself against the dashboard with one hand, an almost dainty motion. Slowly, almost involuntarily, Dr. Wilkins raised his head to look at Hassmann in the rear view mirror. *Almost lost it, didn't you, old man?* Hassmann thought, staring impassively back at him, and after a moment Dr. Wilkins looked shakily away. They began slowly to pick up speed again, wobbling slightly, although Dr. Wilkins was careful to keep them under fifty this time. This compulsive speeding, obviously pushing himself to or beyond the edge of his driving ability, was the first real indication of strain or tension that Dr. Wilkins had allowed to escape from behind his smooth, hard-lacquered façade, and Hassmann greeted it with interest and a certain degree of vindictiveness.

A few minutes more brought them out of the hills. They slowed down to rattle across a small chain-link bridge over a frozen river. A tank was parked to one side of the road, near the bridge entrance, its hatch open for ventilation, gray smoke panting from its exhaust and rising straight

up into the cold air. A soldier in a steel helmet popped his head up out of the driver's hatch and watched them as they passed. They weren't putting up roadblocks and regulating civilian traffic yet, Hassmann thought, in spite of the recent wave of terrorism, but it obviously wasn't going to be too much longer before they were. There was a small town on the other side of the bridge, half-a-dozen buildings clustered around a crossroads. Political graffiti had been spray-painted on several of the buildings, particularly on the blank-faced side-wall of a boarded-up gas station: YANKEES GO HOME . . . FEDS OUT OF WEST VIRGINIA NOW . . . SECESSION, NOT RECESSION . . . FUCK THE UNION . . . A sloppy, half-hearted attempt to obliterate the graffiti had been made, and only a few letters of each slogan remained, but Hassmann had seen them often enough elsewhere to have little difficulty reconstructing them. The restaurant was a mile beyond the town, a large stone-and-timber building that had once been a grinding mill—now hidden spotlights splashed the ivy-covered walls with pastel lights, and the big wooden waterwheel was sheathed in glistening ice.

There was a network newsvan parked in front of the restaurant, and Dr. Wilkins, who had been anxiously checking his watch on the last stretch from town, grunted in satisfaction when he saw it. As they pulled up, a news crew with a minicam unit climbed out of the van and took up position in front of the restaurant steps. Other reporters got out of their parked cars—pinching out unfinished cigarettes and carefully tucking them away—and began to saunter over as well, some of them slapping themselves on the arms and joking with one another about the cold in low, rapid voices. Hassmann heard one of the reporters laugh, the sound carrying clearly on the cold winter air.

Dr. Wilkins switched off the ignition, and they all sat motionless and silent for a moment, listening to the metallic *ticking* noises the engine made as it cooled. Then, with forced brightness, Dr. Wilkins said, "Well, we're here! Everybody out!" Mrs. Wilkins ignored him. She was staring out at the gathering knot of reporters, and for the first time she seemed shaken, her icy composure broken. "Frank," she said in an unsteady voice, "I—Frank, I just *can't*, I can't face them, I can't—" She was trembling. Dr. Wilkins patted her hand perfunctorily. He noticed Hassmann watching them, and glared at him with murderous resentment, his careful mask slipping for a moment. Hassmann stared stonily back. "It'll be all right, Fran," Dr. Wilkins said, patting her hand again. "It's just until we get inside. Julian promised me that he wouldn't let any of them into the restaurant." Mrs. Wilkins was shaking her head blindly. "It'll only be a minute. Let me do all the talking. It'll be okay, you'll see."

He looked coldly at Hassmann. "Come on," he said brusquely, to Hassmann, and got out of the car. He walked quickly around to the passenger side, opened the door, and said, "Come on" again, to his wife this time, in a low coaxing tone an adult might use to a frightened child. Even so, he had to reach down and half-pull her to her feet before he could get her out of the car. He bent to look at Hassmann again. "You, too," he said in a harsh, dangerous voice. "Come on. Don't give me any trouble now, you little shit. Get out."

Hassmann climbed out of the car. It was colder than ever, and he could feel the clammy sweat drying on his body with a rapidity that made him shiver. Dr. Wilkins came up between him and Mrs. Wilkins and took each of them by the arm; and they began walking toward the restaurant. The reporters were looking toward them now, and the camera lights on the van came on, nearly blinding them.

Dr. Wilkins kept them walking right at the reporters. The small crowd parted and reformed around them, swallowing them, and then it seemed to Hassmann as if everything was happening at once, too fast to follow. Faces jostled around him, faces thrust forward toward him, their mouths opening and closing. Voices gabbled. A reporter was saying, "with the ratification vote on the Act of Secession coming up in the statehouse Wednesday, and similar votes later this week in Michigan, Ohio, and Colorado," and Dr. Wilkins was waving his hand airily and saying, "more than enough support on the floor." Another reporter was saying something to Mrs. Wilkins and she was dully muttering, "I don't know, I don't know . . ." Flashbulbs were popping at them now, and they had climbed part-way up the restaurant steps. Someone was thrusting a microphone into Hassmann's face and bellowing, "make you feel?" and Hassmann was shrugging and shaking his head. Someone else was saying, "latest Gallup poll shows that two-thirds of the people of West Virginia support succession," and Dr. Wilkins was saying, "everything you hear, love?" and the reporters laughed.

Hassmann wasn't listening any more. Ever since last weekend he had been walking around like a somnambulist, and now the feeling had intensified; he felt feverish and unreal, as if everything were happening behind a thin wall of insulating glass, or happening to someone else while he watched. He barely noticed that Dr. Wilkins had stopped walking and was now staring directly into the blinking eye of the minicam, or that the reporters had grown curiously silent. Dr. Wilkins had let his face become serious and somber, and when he spoke this time it was not in the insouciant tone he'd been using a moment before, but in a slow, sincere, gravelly voice. The voice seemed to go on and on and on, while

Hassmann shivered in the cold wind, and then Dr. Wilkins' heavy hand closed over Hassmann's shoulder, and the flashbulbs went off in their faces like summer lightning.

Then Julian was ushering them into the restaurant—fawning shamelessly over Dr. Wilkins and promising to “take their order personally”—and shutting the reporters outside. He led them through the jungly interior of the old mill to a table in a corner nook where the walls were hung with bronze cooking utensils and old farm implements, and then buzzed anxiously around Dr. Wilkins like a fat unctuous bee while they consulted the menu. The menu had no prices, and as far as Hassmann was concerned might just as well have been written in Arabic. Mrs. Wilkins refused to order, or even to speak, and her rigid silence eventually embarrassed even Julian. Impatiently, Dr. Wilkins ordered for all of them—making a point of asking Hassmann, with thinly disguised sarcasm, if the coulbiac of salmon and the osso bucco would be to his liking—and Julian hurried gratefully away.

Silence settled over the table. Dr. Wilkins stared blankly at Hassmann, who stared blankly back. Mrs. Wilkins seemed to have gone into shock—she was staring down at the table, her body stiffly erect, her hands clenched in her lap, it was hard to tell if she was even breathing. Dr. Wilkins looked at his wife, looked away. Still no one had spoken. “Well, Jim,” Dr. Wilkins started to say with leaden joviality, “I think you’ll like—” and then he caught the scorn in the look that Hassmann was giving him, and let the sentence falter to a stop. It had become clear to Hassmann that Dr. Wilkins hated him as much as or more than his wife did—but in spite of that, and in spite of the fact that he had already gotten as much use out of Hassmann as he was going to get, he was too much the politician to be able to stop going through the motions of the charade. Dr. Wilkins locked eyes with Hassmann for a moment, opened his mouth to say something else, closed it again. Abruptly, he looked tired.

A smooth silent waiter placed their appetizers in front of them, glided away again. Slowly, Mrs. Wilkins looked up. She had one of those smooth Barbie-doll faces that enable some women to look thirty when they are fifty, but now her face had harsh new lines in it, as if someone had gone over it with a needle dipped in acid. Moving with the slow-motion grace of someone in a diving suit on the bottom of the sea, she reached out to touch the linen napkin before her on the table. She smiled fondly at it, caressing it with her fingertips. She was staring straight across the table at Hassmann now, but she wasn’t seeing him; somewhere on its way across the table, her vision had taken the sort of right-angle turn that

allows you to look directly into the past. "Frank," she said, in a light, amused, reminiscent tone unlike any that Hassmann had heard her use, "do you remember the time we were having the Graingers over for dinner, back when you were still in city council? And just before they got there I realized that we'd run out of clean napkins?"

"Fran—" Dr. Wilkins said warningly, but she ignored him; she was speaking to Hassmann now, although he was sure that she still wasn't seeing him as Hassmann—he was merely filling the role of listener, one of the many vague someones she'd told this anecdote to, for it was plain that she'd told it many times before. "And so I gave Peter some money and sent him down to the store to quick buy me some napkins, even *paper* ones were better than nothing." She was smiling now as she spoke. "So after a while he comes back, the Graingers were here by then, and he comes marching solemnly right into the living room where we're having drinks, and he says—he must have been about five—he says 'I looked all over the store, Mom, and I got the best ones I could find. These must be really good because they're *sanitary* ones, see? It says so right on the box.' And he holds up this great big box of Kotex!" She laughed. "And he looks so intent and serious, and he's so proud of being a big enough boy to be given a job to do, and he's trying so hard to do it right and please us, I just didn't have the heart to scold him, even though old Mr. Grainger looked like he'd just swallowed his false teeth, and Frank choked and sprayed his drink all over the room." Still smiling, still moving languidly, she picked up her fork and dug it into one of the her veal-and-shrimp quenelles, and then she stopped, and her eyes cleared, and Hassmann knew that all at once she was *seeing* him again. Life crashed back into her face with shocking suddenness, like a storm wave breaking over a seawall, flushing it blood-red. Abruptly, spasmodically, viciously, she threw her fork at Hassmann. It bounced off his chest and clattered away across the restaurant floor. Her face had gone white now, as rapidly as it had flushed, and she said, "*I will not eat with the man who murdered my son.*"

Hassmann stood up. He heard his own voice saying, "Excuse me," in a polite and formal tone, and then he had turned and was walking blindly away across the restaurant, somehow managing not to blunder into any of the other tables. He kept walking until a rough-hewn door popped up in front of him, and then he pushed through it, and found himself in the washroom.

It was cold and dim and silent in the washroom, and the air smelled of cold stone and dust and antiseptic, and, faintly, of ancient piss. The only sound was the low rhythmic belching and gurgling of cisterns. A jet

of freezing air was coming in through a crack in the window molding, and it touched Hassmann's skin like a needle.

He moved to the porcelain washbasin and splashed cold water over his face, the way they do in the movies, but it made him feel worse instead of better. He shivered. Automatically, he wet a tissue and began to scrub at the food stain that Mrs. Wilkins' fork had left on his cheap pin-striped suit. He kept catching little glimpses of himself in the tarnished old mirror over the washbasin, and he watched himself slyly, fascinated without ever looking at himself straight on. They had *film* footage of his killing the Wilkins boy—that particular stretch of film had been shown over and over again on TV since last weekend. As the demonstrators rushed up the steps of the campus Administration building toward the line of waiting Guardsmen, there was a very clear sequence of his bringing his rifle up and shooting Peter Wilkins down. Other Guardsmen had fired, and other demonstrators had fallen—four dead and three others seriously wounded, all told—but there could be no doubt that *he* was the one who had killed Peter Wilkins. Yes, that one was *his*, all right.

He leaned against the wall, pressing his forehead against the cold stone, feeling the stones suck the warmth from his flesh. For some reason he found himself thinking about the duck he'd raised, one of the summers they still went to the farm—the duck they'd wryly named Dinner. He'd fattened that stupid duck all summer, and then when it was time to kill it, he'd barely been able to bring himself to do it. He'd made a botch of cutting its head off, faltered on the first stroke and then had to slash two more times to get the job done. And then the duck had run headless across the farmyard, spouting blood, and he'd had to chase it down. He'd given it to his father to clean, and then gone off behind the barn to throw up. All the rest of the family had said that the duck was delicious, but he'd had to leave the table several times during the meal to throw up again. How his father had laughed at him!

Hassmann was shivering again, and he couldn't seem to make himself stop. As clearly as if it was really in the room with him, he heard Captain Simes' voice saying, "He's mousetrapped himself into it! His son was one of the ringleaders in planning the campus rally, and he was getting a lot of local media coverage simply because he *was* Wilkins' son. So, just before the rally that weekend, Wilkins published an open letter in all the major papers—" Dr. Wilkins' voice, resonant and sonorous as he stares into the camera lights:—"in that letter, I told my son that if he were killed while taking part in a riot that he himself had helped to create . . . well, I told him that I would mourn him forever, but that far from condemning the man who killed him, I'd seek that man out and shake his hand, and

then take him out to dinner to thank him for having the steadfastness to uphold the Constitution of the United States in the face of armed sedition—' And so now he's stuck with *doing* it, or losing what little face he has left!" Simes' voice again. Simes' giggle.

He'd talked to Simes for nearly twenty minutes before he'd realized that the tall glass of "iced tea" in Simes' hand was actually 100-proof whiskey, and by that time Simes had been glassy-eyed and swaying, mumbling, "A civil war! And none of this nuclear-exchange shit, either. They're going to fight this one house to house through every small town in America. A nice *long* war . . ."

Hassmann stared at himself in the mirror. His face was hard and drawn, gaunt, his cheeks hollowed. His eyes were pitiless and cold. He could not recognize himself. The stranger in the mirror stared unwinkingly back at him; his face was like stone, the kind of cold and ancient stone that sucks the heat from anything that touches it.

A nice long war . . .

He went back into the restaurant. Heads turned surreptitiously to watch him as he passed, and he could see some of the other diners leaning close to each other to whisper and stare. Dr. Wilkins was sitting alone at the table, surrounded by untouched dishes of food, some of them still faintly steaming. As Hassmann came up, he raised his head, and they exchanged bleak stares. He had taken his glasses off, and his face looked doughy and naked without them, less assured, less commanding. His eyes looked watery and tired.

"Julian is letting Mrs. Wilkins lie down in back for a while," Dr. Wilkins said. "Until she feels a little better." Hassmann said nothing, and made no attempt to sit down. Dr. Wilkins reached out for his glasses, put them on, and then peered at Hassmann again, as if to make sure that he was talking to the right man. He drew himself up in his chair a little, glancing at the nearest table with a motion of the eyes so quick as to be nearly imperceptible, like the flick of a lizard's tongue. Was he worried that, in spite of Julian's promise, some of the other customers might be reporters with hidden directional mikes? Some of them might be, at that. "I guess I owe you an apology," Dr. Wilkins said heavily, after a pause. He worked his mouth as if he was tasting something unpleasant, and then continued to speak in a stiff, reluctant voice. "My wife's been under a lot of emotional strain lately. She was distraught. You'll have to make allowances for that. She doesn't realize how hard this has been on you, too, how unpleasant it must have been for you to be forced to take a human life—"

"No, sir," Hassmann said in a clear, distinct voice, interrupting, not

knowing what words he was speaking until he heard them leave his lips . . . feeling the final insulating thickness of glass shatter as he spoke and all the raw emotional knowledge he'd been trying to deny for more than a week rush in upon him . . . knowing even as he spoke that speaking these words would change him irrevocably forever . . . change Dr. Wilkins . . . change everything . . . watching Dr. Wilkins' face, already wincing at the blow he could sense coming . . . seeing the headless duck run flapping through the dusty farmyard . . . his father laughing . . . Mrs. Wilkins' eyes, watching him in the rear view mirror, in the dark . . . the soldier popping his head up out of the tank hatch to watch them pass . . . FUCK THE UNION . . . a nice *long* war . . . the hard, merciless eyes of the stranger in the mirror, the stranger that was now *him* . . . remembering the clean, exhilarating rush of joy, the fierce leap of the heart, as he'd emptied the clip of his semi-automatic rifle into the onrushing figure, relishing the flaring blue fire and the smoke and the noise, *got you, you bastard, got you*, smashing the other man and flinging him aside in a tangle of broken limbs all in one godlike moment, with a flick of his finger

....
 "No, sir," he said, smiling bleakly at the tired old man, enunciating each word with terrible precision, not even, at the end, wanting to hurt the other man, but simply to make him *understand*. "I enjoyed it," he said.

Tiger In the Snow

Daniel Wynn Barber

Daniel Wynn Barber was born in Long Beach, California, on December 7, 1947. He grew up in the Midwest, where "Tiger in the Snow" takes its setting. Drafted in 1967, he served in Vietnam, where he was wounded in 1969. His wounds required two years of treatment at Fitzsimmons Army Hospital in Denver. Barber was so taken with the city that he settled there. He and his wife, Patricia, have a brand new son, Sean Wesley.

Barber's fascination with horror has led him to create "The Fantasy Puppet Ensemble," a troupe that presents benefit shows every Halloween. "Tiger in the Snow" is his second published story. Other stories include "Light Innocence" in The Minnesotan Science Fiction Reader and "Wings of the Hunter" in a forthcoming anthology of horror from the publishers of Space and Time. Barber has also "banged out a 600 page science fiction/supernatural novel."

JUSTIN SENSED THE tiger as soon as he reached the street. He didn't see it, or hear it. He simply . . . sensed it.

Leaving the warm safety of the Baxters' porch light behind him, he stared down the sidewalk that fronted State Street, feeling the night swallow him in a single hungry gulp. He stopped when he reached the edge of the Baxters' property line and looked back wistfully toward their front door.

Too bad the evening had to end. It had been just about the finest evening he could remember. Not that Steve and he hadn't had some fine old times together, the way best friends will; but this particular evening had been, well, magical. They had played *The Shot Brothers* down in Steve's basement while Mr. and Mrs. Baxter watched TV upstairs. When the game had been going well and everything was clicking, Justin could almost believe that Steve and he really were brothers. And that feeling had never been stronger than it had been this evening.

When Mrs. Baxter had finally called down that it was time to go, it

had struck Justin as vaguely strange that she would be packing him off on a night like this, seeing how he and Steve slept over at one another's homes just about every weekend. But this evening was different. Despite the snow, home called to him in sweet siren whispers.

Mrs. Baxter had bundled him up in his parka, boots, and mittens, and then, much to his surprise, she had kissed his cheek. Steve had seen him to the door, said a quick goodbye, then hurried away to the den. Funny thing, Steve's eyes had seemed moist.

Then Justin had stepped out into the night, and Mrs. Baxter had closed the door behind him, leaving him alone with the dark and the cold and . . . the tiger.

At the edge of the Baxters' property, Justin glanced around for a glimpse of the beast; but the street appeared deserted save for the houses and parked cars under a downy blanket of fresh snow. It was drifting down lazily now, indifferent after the heavy fall of that afternoon. Justin could see the skittering flakes trapped within the cones of light cast by the street lamps, but otherwise the black air seemed coldly empty. The line of lamps at every corner of State Street gave the appearance of a tunnel of light that tapered down to nothingness; and beyond that tunnel, the dark pressed eagerly in.

For a moment, Justin felt the urge to scurry back to the Baxters' door and beg for sanctuary, but he knew he should be getting home. Besides, he wasn't some chicken who ran from the dark. He was one of the Shot Brothers. Rough and ready. Fearless. Hadn't he proven that to stupid Dale Corkland just the other day? "You scared?" old zit-faced Corkland had asked him. And Justin had shown him.

At the corner, Justin looked both ways, although he knew there wouldn't be many cars out on a night like this. Then he scanned the hedges along a nearby house, where dappled shadows hung frozen in the branches. Excellent camouflage for a tiger—particularly one of those white, Siberian tigers he'd read about.

He kept a close eye on those hedges as he crossed the street. Snow swelled up around his boots and sucked at his feet, making it impossible to run should a tiger spring from behind the mailbox on the far corner. He stopped before he reached that mailbox, listening for the low blowing sound that tigers sometimes make as they lie in ambush. But all he heard was the rasping of his own breath. ("You scared?") Yes. Tigers were nothing to be trifled with. They were as dangerous as the ice on Shepherd's Pond.

Justin had stared at that ice, thinking about the warm weather they'd

had the past week. Then he had looked up at Dale Corkland's face, three years older than his and sporting a gala display of acne. "You scared?" And Justin had shown him.

But that was then and this was now; and weren't tigers more merciless than ice? Oh, yes indeed.

Justin gave himself a good mental shaking. He tried to summon those things his father had told him at other times when this tiger-fear had come upon him. (*Don't be such a baby.*) At night, when he would awaken screaming after a tiger nightmare. (*It was only a dream.*) Or when he felt certain that a tiger was lurking about the basement. (*There are no tigers in the city. You only find tigers in the zoo.*)

Wrapping himself snug in these assurances, Justin tramped past the brick retaining wall at the corner of State and Sixteenth without so much as a glance toward the spidery line of poplars where a tiger might be hiding. He rounded the corner and marched on. Heck, he had walked this way dozens of times. Hundreds, maybe.

But tonight the usually comfortable features seemed alien and warped out of reality under the snow, and finding himself in this strange white landscape, Justin suddenly felt the tiger-fear return. It bobbed up and down within him until he could almost feel the tiger's nearness, so close that the hot jungle breath seemed to huff against his cheek.

He was halfway down the block when he saw a shadow slip effortlessly from behind the house two doors up. It seemed to glide dreamlike across the snow, then disappear behind a car parked in the driveway. It was just a shadow, but before it had vanished, Justin thought he caught a hint of striping.

There are no tigers in the city.

Justin watched and waited—waited for whatever it was to show itself. He even considered turning back, rerouting around Rush Street, but that would put it behind him.

Come on, he scolded himself. You only find tigers in India. Or the zoo. Or behind parked cars. Nonsense. Tigers don't stalk kids from behind parked cars in the middle of an American city. Only little kids let themselves be scared by shadows in the night. Not one of the Shot Brothers. Not a kid who had dared the ice on Shepherd's Pond. Not a kid who was only two years away from attending Rathburn Junior High, where you get to keep your stuff in your own locker and change classrooms every hour and eat your lunch out on the bleachers. Kids at Rathburn didn't go whimpering and whining because they saw a shadow in the snow—probably thrown by a branch moving in the wind.

But there is no wind tonight.

Justin swallowed hard, then started forward. He walked slowly, never shifting his gaze from the taillight of that parked car. If only he could see around it without getting any nearer. If something were crouching back there, it would be on him before he could cover the first five feet. And then . . .

. . . teeth and claws, tearing and slashing.

You scared?

You bet.

When he had drawn even with the driveway across the street, Justin stopped. Two more steps, maybe three, and he would see if his father and the kids at Rathburn Junior were right, or if tigers do indeed lie in wait on winter streets. Of course, there was still time to turn back.

Perhaps it was the idea of turning back that propelled him forward. If he were to retrace his steps, he would never know; but if he looked and saw no tiger behind that car, then the tiger-fear would be banished, and he wouldn't see them anywhere. Not in bushes. Not behind trees. Not between houses. Just three steps, and he could lay tigers to rest forever.

Justin took those three steps the way he had walked out onto the ice on Shepherd's pond. Old zit-faced Corkland had dared him, and he had faced it.

One—two—three.

He turned and looked.

Nothing. Nothing behind that car but an old coaster wagon lying on its side. No tigers. No lions, bears, werewolves, or boogie-men. Just an old wagon. His father had been right all along.

He covered the last block and a half with steps as light and carefree as those of a June day, when the air smelled of new-mown grass and the sun baked your skin brown. But, of course, it wasn't June, and as he sprinted up his porch steps Justin realized that he had reached home without a moment to spare. He could scarcely see his breath at all. Much longer out in the icy cold and he thought his lungs might have frozen solid.

As he stepped into the familiar warmth of his own house, he heard voices coming from the living room. It sounded as though his folks were having a party, although the voices seemed rather subdued—much the way they sounded on bridge nights when the evenings began quietly, but noised up as the hours grew old.

Justin tip-toed down the hall, thinking it wise not to interrupt. And as he passed the living room, he caught a snatch of conversation. It was a man speaking, ". . . bound to happen eventually. They should have put up a fence years ago. I've a good mind to . . ."

"Oh, for God's sake, Gordon," a woman said. (It sounded like Aunt Phyllis.) "This isn't the time."

That was all he heard before hurrying to his room.

When he flipped on the light, he was greeted by all the treasures which reflected his short life in intimate detail. The Darth Vader poster, the Packers pennant, the Spitfire on his dresser, the bedspread decorated in railroad logos.

And one new addition, sitting in the corner on great feline haunches.

For the briefest instant, Justin felt the urge to run—to flee into the living room and hurl himself into his mother's arms, as he had done so many times in the past. But as he stared transfixed into the tiger's huge, emerald eyes, he felt the fear slipping from him like some dark mantle, to be replaced by the soft and gentle cloak of understanding.

"It's time to go, isn't it?" he said in a voice that was low, but unwavering.

The tiger's eyes remained impassive, as deep and silent as green forest pools. Warm pools that never froze over, the way Shepherd's Pond did.

In his mind, Justin heard again the pistol crack of ice giving way beneath him, and he felt the chill water closing over his head. It really hadn't hurt that much, not the way he would have thought. Not much pain, just a moment of remorse when he realized he wouldn't be seeing his folks any more—or Steve . . .

. . . had it all been a dream, this last wonderful evening together with Steve? Would Steve even remember?

Justin looked at the tiger, searching its peaceful face for the answer; but those fathomless eyes kept their secrets.

"Did you follow me tonight?" Justin asked.

Whiskers twitched as the tiger's muzzle wrinkled into a slight grin.

"Yes," Justin said softly. "I thought it was you. You've been following me all my life, haven't you?" He turned to close his bedroom door, and when he turned back, the tiger was crouching to spring.

Watch the Birdie

Ramsey Campbell

Ramsey Campbell has become an institution in The Year's Best Horror Stories, having appeared in every volume but one—and under three different editors. This seems altogether fitting, considering that since his appearance in Series I, Ramsey Campbell has become an institution in the horror genre as a whole. As novelist, short story writer, anthologist, and critic, Campbell has solidly established himself to be the best writer working in this field today. An early prot(g) of August Derleth, Campbell was eighteen when Arkham House published his first book of horror stories, The Inhabitant of the Lake & Less Welcome Tenants. Since then Campbell has moved on to chill his readers with such novels as The Face That Must Die, The Parasite, The Nameless, and Incarnate. His most recent books include a novel, Obsession, and a collection of his short fiction, Cold Print. He is now at work on “a large supernatural novel” entitled The Hungry Moon.

Born in Liverpool on January 4, 1946, Ramsey Campbell is fond of using his native city as a source for his particular brand of horror. At present he and his wife and two children live in Merseyside in “an enormous turn-of-the-century house [with] fifteen rooms or more and a cellar and sundry other good things.” “Watch the Birdie” was published as a 100-copy signed and numbered chapbook by Rosemary Pardoe last Christmas. Campbell's own foreword and afterword (yes, they are true) more than double the story's disquieting impact.

This piece was written over the last two days of April 1983, at the request of John Meakin, then the landlord of the Baltic Fleet, a pub on the dock road in Liverpool. He published an intermittent newspaper called The Daily Meak and was known to his friends as the Admiral. The account that follows was to be published in his newspaper.

—Ramsey Campbell

WATCH THE BIRDIE

I HOPE I SHALL not be blamed if a true story has no proper ending.

Let me start by explaining that I'm in the business of making Merseyside disappear. No, I'm not a town planner: I create horrors as a writer instead. Many of my tales have been set in Merseyside, and a disconcerting number of the settings no longer exist, rather as the model in the Poe story died as soon as the painter had achieved her likeness on canvas. For example, "The Companion" takes place in the old Tower fairground at New Brighton; "The Show Goes On" is set in the Hippodrome cinema, last seen in a series of skips; my novel *The Face That Must Die* shows Cantril Farm through the eyes of a paranoid schizophrenic, though it looks pretty much as it does to the rest of us, and now they've changed the name of Cantril Farm. And my first novel was set in Toxteth. You will appreciate that I have yet to write about the present government.

My novel *To Wake The Dead* (known in America as *The Parasite*, though I haven't room to explain why) contains a chapter set in the Grapes in Egerton Street, during the reign of the Meakins. That's how I came to be in the Baltic Fleet recently, to present a copy to the Admiral. The place was packed with office celebrations and planners discussing how many trees they could plant in the car parks next year, and so it wasn't until closing time that I had a chance to make the presentation. The Admiral locked the doors and offered me a coffee, and we settled down by the parrot for a chat.

The parrot had been dozing so soundly that nothing had roused it, not even the cries of anguish from the dock road as someone else discovered there was no way into the Baltic Fleet car park. Now it blinked at us with the balefulness of a Member of Parliament woken by question time, and croaked something that sounded vaguely Russian to me. "I don't now where he got that from," the Admiral said.

I had a momentary impression that I should know, but couldn't think why: something I'd seen in the pub? I glanced round at the deserted tables, smudgy now that clouds like sludge were flooding the sky outside, and wondered aloud if the pub had a resident ghost. "Could be," the Admiral said.

My interest quickened and so, I imagined, did the parrot's—listening for something worth repeating, I supposed. "You've seen it?"

"Heard it. That was enough."

He didn't seem to be joking. "Good places to hear ghosts, pubs," I suggested.

"That's all I'd been drinking," he assured me, tapping the coffee mug and earning himself a slow reproving psittacine blink. The pub was growing dimmer. "Tell me about it," I said, "and maybe I can write about it for your newspaper."

"I was sitting here one afternoon drinking coffee." The pub had been locked and deserted, the sun had dazzled the windows so that he couldn't see the deserted interior without moving from where he was sitting, and quite without warning he'd heard someone coming upstairs from below.

You must have seen the steps that lead down to the toilets and their famed graffiti, or if you haven't yet you're bound to: stone steps that look as if they might lead to a vault or a catacomb. He'd heard footsteps where he knew nobody could be, and so he didn't call out, just reached for a weapon. He was still hoping that he wouldn't have to find out if it would work under the circumstances, when the footsteps faltered and went back downstairs. When he made himself go down, of course there was nobody to be seen.

Again I felt there was something in the pub I should have noticed, again I couldn't think where. "What did the footsteps sound like?"

He pondered. "Not as heavy as they ought to have sounded," he said finally, frowning.

"Incomplete?" I suggested, trying to bring my description to life.

At last he said, "Big and slow, but as if they weren't quite there."

He didn't seem happy with that either. "And how was the parrot behaving while all this was going on?" I said.

"Nervous." Then he grinned. "Talking to himself, God knows what about."

Suddenly I thought I knew. "That Slavonic stuff he was repeating before?"

"Could well have been. How did you know?"

I wasn't sure yet, nor sure that I wanted to be. "Hang on while I have a wee," I said, as I've found one tends to say when one is the father of toddlers.

The steps to the basement were even dimmer than the pub. Somehow the dimness made my footsteps sound muffled, timid. I wished the Admiral would switch on the lights; I wished I hadn't found an excuse to go and look at what I thought I'd seen, instead of inviting him to look for himself. I couldn't help remembering that whatever he'd heard on the steps had come back down here, couldn't help remembering what I was almost sure I'd seen.

It had only been graffiti in the Gents: a few scrawled words among the collectible wit. I'd hardly noticed them except to wonder in passing what they said, for I'd been distracted by the creaking of one of the cubicle doors: I'd thought for a moment that someone had peered out at me, a large pale face which had made me think of a pig leaning out of a stall, in the moment before I'd seen there was nobody. I remembered that now, and suddenly the basement seemed colder. That must have been why I shivered as I went quickly into the Gents.

You've seen the graffiti for yourself, or you've been told about them. No wonder customers come upstairs with a smile on their faces and their heads full of quotes. But all I could see just then were the words in a language I recognized now, scrawled in the midst of the jokes. I'd heard those words more than once, I realized, and I had a good idea of what they meant and what they could do. I started forward to the nearest cubicle, for a handful of paper to wipe them out. I was nearly at the cubicle door when it creaked open and something squeezed out to take hold of me.

If I'm ever tempted not to trust my instincts I shall remember that moment. Instinct made me close my eyes tight while I lurched out of reach, toward the scrawled words. I kept my eyes on the words as I rubbed at them frantically, with my hands, since that was the quickest way. At the edge of my vision I had the impression of a figure so swollen it filled the doorway through which it was trying to struggle, arms that seemed to be lengthening as they groped toward me, groped then rose toward the large flat face that appeared to have no features. They poked at it, and then it had eyes—holes, at any rate. Then I'd rubbed out the last traces of the words, and I was alone but for the creaking of the door of the empty cubicle.

I admit it didn't take me long to climb the steps, yet by the time I reached the top I'd managed to persuade myself that I couldn't have seen all that, couldn't have seen anything like it. The pub looked as dim as the steps now. I might have asked the Admiral to put on the lights, but just then I wanted to ask my questions and get out of there. "Have you been crossing any Russians lately?" I said, as lightly as I could.

"Not unless you count selling Vladivar, no."

He thought I wasn't serious. "Just think about it. You haven't had trouble with anyone Slavonic?"

"Not in the pub, no."

I could tell he was remembering. "Outside?"

"Might have been. They could have been Slavs. A couple of sailors

pulled knives on each other in the car park one night, and we had to sort them out, that's all."

"They couldn't have sneaked in here afterward, could they?"

"Not a chance."

"That makes sense."

He stood up to switch on the lights. "Going to tell me about it?" he said.

"When I've told you how I know." Both his gaze and the parrot's were making me uncomfortable. "You see," I said, "I once did some research for a novel about the basis of all the vampire legends, until I found someone else had already written it. One thing I did was talk to a specialist in Slavonic languages who told me some of the old Slavonic incantations. There were a couple I wouldn't have used even if I'd written the book; not once he told me what they were supposed to call up. Well," I said, glad to get it over with, "one of them was written on the wall in your Gents."

He jumped up. "It's there now?"

"It was until I rubbed it out."

He sat down again and gave me a doubtful look. I could see he thought I was making up the story for his newspaper. "How come you can read Slavonic writing?" he said suspiciously.

"I can't. I copied the stuff I researched down phonetically, and that's what whoever wrote it in the Gents did. Don't you see, whichever sailor wanted to get his own back on you sent someone in to write it for him, told him what to write. And that's not all they did—"

But there was no need for me to go on, for the parrot had started croaking—croaking the words it had already tried to pronounce. I pointed nervously at it while the Admiral frowned at me, then I punched the cage to interrupt the bird before it could finish.

The Admiral's frown was no longer puzzled but dangerous. "What did you want to do that for?" he demanded.

"Didn't you hear what it was saying? Whoever was sent in here didn't just write the words on the wall, they must have spoken them as well when there was nobody to hear—nobody but *him*," I said, nodding at the parrot, which glared at me. "Couldn't you tell it was Slavonic?"

The Admiral wasn't convinced. "You haven't told me yet," he growled, "what it was supposed to do."

I couldn't go into that, not then, not there. "Let's just say that if you used the invocation in a graveyard, what it called up would be dreadful enough, but if you weren't in a graveyard it would be something even less human," I said, but my last few words might well have been

inaudible, for he was turning his head toward the steps. I saw his face change, and knew what he was hearing before I heard it myself.

I should have known that the footsteps would be terribly slow. "They're bigger," the Admiral whispered, and I could hear what he meant, though I was hearing them for the first time: they sounded as if they were growing as they lumbered up the stairs—as if they were putting on more substance. I had disliked the dimness, but now I wished desperately that he hadn't turned on the lights: at least then we would have been spared seeing. The footsteps came up halfway, unsteadily but purposefully, and I saw what might have been the top of a head, something white and rounded that seemed to be having trouble in keeping its shape. I was praying to be able to look away, to be able not to see any more, when the white dome jerked downward, the footsteps plodded back to the basement. Interrupting had achieved something after all.

Well, I told you at the outset that I couldn't promise you a proper ending. I still visit the Baltic Fleet, for the food as much as anything, but not after dark. I admit I keep a sharp eye on the parrot and the graffiti, and sometimes I need to be spoken to twice. I know the Admiral doesn't take kindly to people hitting the parrot's cage, and so I can only suggest that if you hear the bird speaking what sounds like Slavonic you do your best to interest it in something else. Quickly.

I delivered the story to John Meakin at the beginning of May 1983. I visited the pub several times during that year, but the newspaper hadn't yet been published. Close to Christmas 1983 I arrived at the pub to find it locked and shuttered. It reopened under the new management this year. Nobody seems to know where John Meakin is.

Coming Soon to a Theatre Near You

by David J. Schow

David J. Schow was born on July 13, 1955, in Marburg, West Germany—a German orphan adopted by American parents. He left Europe while a child and traveled all across the United States, before settling down in Los Angeles. As his fiction indicates, Schow is an avid film buff, and he claims to know more spatter films trivia than anyone on Earth. Most of his writing has been on films, either as a columnist for various publications or as a contributing editor to film books. He has recently completed an eight-part series on the television show The Outer Limits for Twilight Zone Magazine. (He had to use a pseudonym, Oliver Lowenbruck, when the following story appeared in the same issue of that magazine as did one of the series.) An outgrowth of those articles was The Outer Limits Companion, out this fall from Berkley. Schow has written eleven novelizations and series novels under at least four separate pseudonyms for Warner and Universal. His short fiction has appeared in Whispers, Weird Tales, Fantasy Tales, Night Cry, Galileo, and Ares.

Schow also appeared in The Year's Best Horror Stories: Series XII—also with a story set in a movie theatre, "One for the Horrors." Despite its title, this last was a piece of whimsical fantasy; despite its title, the following story is out-and-out horror. Schow seems to be a connoisseur of rundown movie houses. He writes: "Like J.A. Bijou's in 'One for the Horrors,' the Omicron was based on a real theatre (one in L.A.) that was massively refurbished as soon as I wrote about it."

JONATHAN DANIEL STONER recognized the dude inside the Hollywood Magic Shoppe, the fellow poring over the display plaque of artificial eyeballs. He was from the Omicron Cinema; one of the employees. Always having five minutes to squander, Jack (as Jonathan had been dubbed in Nam by the few comrades with enough intellectual candlepower to add his first and middle names up to the sum of a tepid joke: hey there's another guy here named Richard Whiskey but we call him Dick Liquor yock yock yock) pulled himself in. He saw that the fake eyeballs were pretty

damned authentic. Nested in felt, they were glossed with some special shellac that made them gleam like real, living, wet eyes. Artificial substitutes, he thought, and his missing right leg sent a wholly imaginary local wince up to his brain.

"Say hey," he said.

The dude from the Omicron looked up. As his face was hit by the combination of the sputtering fluorescents above and the dirty gray daylight sneaking in off Hollywood Boulevard, Jack thought maybe the guy had mononucleosis or something; superficially he looked like mere hippie fallout a decade and a half out of step with the real world, but close up Jack saw that his face was the color of a kitchen sink stained by coffee grounds. Above the face was hair skewed in a dozen directions, matted, unwashed; below, a physique withered by hard weather or drugs or both. His eyes were sunken and glazed with the slightly stoned expression Jack had learned from the perimeter snipers at Nest Kilo—burned-out Qui Nohn alumni who just didn't give a shit anymore. And the hippie image was jelled by the overpowering miasma (no, *stink*) of patchouli oil wafting from every pore toward Jack like mustard gas. God, he hated the stuff.

The dude had not quite connected yet, and appeared to be waiting for more input.

"I come into the Omicron all the time," Jack prompted. "Last week I caught *Dial M for Murder* and *House of Wax*. The two-way 3-D glasses were a neat idea." Some management genius had stamped out dual lenses that were red-green for the black-and-white feature, and flipped to polarized lenses for color. The two-dollar show had been packed.

It seemed to take entire geologic ages for the dude to react. "Oh yeah," he said in an arid, rasping voice. "I seen you lotsa times. I remember your walking stick. Yeah." He turned back to his tray of eyeballs.

Jack shifted his weight from his government-issue cane, leaning closer to regain the dude's attention despite the eye-watering, minty stench. "What's next?"

Again the slow shift, as though the dude were crippled in a way Jack could not see. *Always say handicapped, not crippled*, Compton, the CO, had advised with shit-eating sincerity before his discharge. *At least you've fought your last battle, soldier*. Compton had always had a supreme rectal-cranial inversion.

Crippled. The dude arm-wrestled his own memory and won. "Uhh—*Bloody Mama* and *Bonnie and Clyde*. That's it for Crime Week. For the weekend we got *Black Moon*. And . . . uh . . ." He plucked a wine-bottle-green eyeball from the tray and inspected it through a nonexistent loupe,

turning it like a jewel. "Some other Louis Malle film. *My Dinner with Andre*, maybe." His voice was strep-throat dry, and sounded like a bad parody of the Man with No Name.

"Or *Atlantic City*?"

"One or the other. See ya there, my man." He extended his free hand and Jack found himself receiving his first power-to-the-people handshake in ten years. The dude's yogurt pallor was easy to dismiss as the cost of toiling in the eternal darkness of a theatre, but the papery texture of his flesh made Jack think of shaking hands with a mummy. The brittle skin seemed to crackle in his grasp, the bones beneath rearranging themselves arthritically like dried voodoo talismans. Up, down, once, twice, zomboid and mechanical. Jack remembered the rack of artificial steel and vinyl arms stored near the shelves from which the medics picked a leg to replace the one he'd lost. It had been like a tombful of dismembered mannikins, the limbs and parts devoid of viscera; hollow, lifeless surrogates. The Omicron dude's dead grasp was what Jack thought shaking with one of those plastic-coated hooks would feel like.

The dude unclasped, then produced from his pocket a slim card in a cashier's-check pattern of waffled green lines, with GOOD FOR ONE FREE ADMISSION stamped on front. "Yours," he said. "Got to keep our regulars satisfied."

"Hey, thanks." Abruptly Jack felt like a heel for mentally bumming the dude.

"See you there." He sought the mate for the single glass eye he balanced in his palm, like pairing clearies for luck in marbles.

Jack executed his stiff, clockwork 180-degree turn and left the store, the thump-click of his workboot and cane in concert barely audible. He practiced to make it unobtrusive; he hated it when newly introduced people gawked at his right leg before looking at his face. He thought he could empathize with the way women felt about their breasts.

On the Boulevard, somebody had pried out the bronze disc of Rhonda Fleming's sidewalk star, stolen it, leaving a crater. A musclebound black superstar, towering above the pedestrians on a hyperthyroidal pair of roller skates with Day-Glo orange wheels, swerved to miss the crater and nearly center-punched Jack. He and the cacophony of his gigantic ghetto-blaster blended into the Friday swarm of walkers before anyone could swear. He'd been wearing an Army fatigue shirt with the sleeves ripped off.

Jack steadied himself against the display window of the Hollywood Magic Shoppe and allowed himself ten seconds of hemlock-pure racism. It primed him, erasing the good feeling of copping a free pass to the

Omicron, and as he walked through the grimy, humid smog and the abrasive tide of Boulevard flotsam, he escalated his irritation into unfocused, hair-trigger anger. Everyone around him on the street was loping along, trying to look badder than everyone else.

Jack's cane attracted no notice on the Boulevard. He was a mundane diversion in the midst of the jarhead Marines on leave, the slutty preteen heartbreakers leaning on the bus stop posts, the meandering gaggles of Japanese tourists, the smug pairings of smartly leathered punks and overconfident faggots, the Hollywood vets with their straight-ahead stares (the better to avoid the pushy Scientologists just this side of Las Palmas), the garbage-pickers and shopping-bag loonies. The Walk of the Stars seemed perpetually encrusted with a gummy vomit of spilled drinks and litter, like the sticky floor of a porno theatre. Along the maze of blaring rock noise and Iranian jewelry shops, step-in eateries displayed steaming, greasy triangles of pizza, or the oily components of colorless hero sandwiches, or peculiar platefuls of what looked like Korean food, varnished for presentation, reminding him of those eyes—preserved, fakely realistic surrogates. The lavender spire of Frederick's pierced the waistline of the Boulevard somewhere behind him, a centerpiece to the whole tacky, vulgar carnival.

You've fought your last battle, crip.

The words fried into Jack's brain, spoken too many times in too many subtle ways. The sentiment ate into his calm like fluorid acid into the fuse of a beer-bottle bomb. This place could really drag you down.

He decided the Omicron pass was not snotty charity, and then forgot about it, feeling a little better.

His grimace into the mirror told him he should shave more often, pay more attention to his hair. But what the hell—he wouldn't care so much half an hour from now.

The prostitute pulled her sweater over her head. Her corner was by the House of Pancakes on Sunset Boulevard, and Jack always thought there was a terrific joke in that somewhere. The first thing she looked at while she stripped was the fleshtone plastic and metal ornamentation of his right leg.

Traveling light. M-16 on rapid-fire, clips in his shirt, rifle grenades taped across his thighs. Bravo Patrol's point man was fifty yards back, sauntering down the dead center of the jungle trail because he knew the anti-personnel mines were salted slyly into the border of the path where careful soldiers might tread. They all knew. Across from him, his counterpart, Teller, eased ahead to help flush out snipers on the opposite side of the path. He and Teller were Bravo Patrol's big mavericks. Teller collected VC ears and

sometimes their balls. The crumping sound of 60-millimeter mortar fire was starting to deafen them. Time to be careful.

She crushed out an unfiltered Lucky Strike and said, "They almost took a packet of your shot, lover." He saw the wings of flab curving over her kidneys. Her ass seemed a yard wide.

"No, they didn't," he said, rehearsed. "And yes, it all still works." He waited naked on the bed. Exposed.

"Talkers are always comedians," she said as she descended on him. The roots of her hennaed blonde hair were brown.

Ears pricking. Seeing that stupid bastard Teller and realizing and forgetting his craving for a smoke and using up three more seconds ripping a grenade loose and locking it into the muzzle of M-16. No time. Wanting to scream they're right above you stupid asshole! No time—stock to shoulder, finger to trigger. The weapon kicks and the tree thirty yards over mushrooms into an orange blossom of fire and screaming Cong. Teller's mouth drops like a stag party patsy's in surprise and he sprays the tree above uselessly with slugs. The whole goddamn jungle comes alive with the nasty, spattering racket of weapons fire like a crazy typewriter noise or water dripped into a pan of hot bacon grease. Not like movie gunfire. The flaming tree lights up the entire perimeter and he is exposed. Has to buy five seconds, has to retreat to cover while Bravo charges to catch up. Backing gingerly through fronds onto the trail. Feeling his foot fall short. He makes one step blind because he's watching Teller's head leave his body. It spins.

There was flat, sour bile in his throat. The whore had too much mileage on her and was unappetizing with her duds off. He felt unaroused and ill. With a fatalistic devotion to duty she worked to excite him reflexively, to make his own body betray him. It became boring, repetitious, like a grindhouse stroke flick. He felt cold lying there, watching thin smoke from the ashtray unreel toward the ceiling.

Nothing happens until he lifts his foot, then the mine POPS beneath him, smacking air concussively through his head. He doesn't feel the rifle grenade taped to his thigh explode. No details; just a stab of heat and bright light. The dispensary lights hurt his eyes more when he awakes, four days later, thinking Bravo Patrol did his job for him.

She pushed off him immediately, and left her sweat on one of his bathroom towels.

"Have a nice day," he said to the empty room, watching daylight fade across his barrack-neat arrangement of serviceable furniture, of home-made bookshelves and desk. He clicked on his TV remote, a do-it-yourself project he'd tinkered together two months ago, and browsed the free program guide he habitually picked up every Wednesday at the Mayfair

Market. Automatically, for a giggle, he thumbed back to the Community Classifieds.

Beached Manatee Shelley Winters uses the Grand Canyon for a toilet! Signed, The Scumbag.

If you wanted a good barometer of Hollywood's blue-collar weirdness, you turned to the Community Classifieds, suitably on the inside back page of the TV schedule and printed on pulp stock so cheap that your reading fingers were black by the time you got to the good stuff. For those too illiterate to make the letter column of the *L.A. Times*, too straight to ever consider undergrounds (now facetiously termed the "alternative press," Jack thought with contempt—another sellout), too normal and mundane to ever air their petty beefs anywhere but in a playroom or a bar with a constantly burbling television set, the Community Classifieds were a steam valve and a cheap thrill all rolled into a single weekly page of lunacy. Any local nonentity could phone in a two-line "ad" or editorial comment for free; the paper always had too many to run, and the week-to-week progressions offered by the column's stalwarts—people who by journalistic squatter's rights appeared regularly, trading barbs under obnoxious pseudonyms—were more entertaining than any diversions offered by the cursed tube.

COME BACK TO THE FIVE & DIME . . . ZARATHUSTRA: Nonwhite athletically inclined punk-oriented animal lovers (handicapped okay) desired for (proto) fringe videos. Selected foreign audience. Flat fee. Working name director. No amateurs or freaks who answer ads like this—685-8299.

Does anybody out there have one of those rubber-chicken enema bags so popular in the 1950s? Hah, thought so. Dr. Sleaze.

House noise cassettes. Keep your canaries company while you're not at home. \$7.95 ea. 757-4414 Eves.

Frustrated military, used athletes and adventurous college boys call Sid. 556-4348.

Jack's eyes skimmed past two familiar words, then backtracked to get the whole message:

The Omicron Theatre should pay us money to attend such a moth-eaten, seat-sprung, paint-peeling, roach-infested garbage dump! Flake away, hippie scum! D.W.E., South La Brea.

When he rose to pull a beer from his tiny refrigerator, he rechecked his shirt pocket, forgetting his temporarily unlovely aroma. The free pass was still there, and that decided him for the evening. His car, a 1972 Comet with the pedals displaced to the left, was still undergoing a mileage checkup in the shop, but that did not put the Omicron out of his range. He could still walk, by God.

The Omicron reminded Jack of a kid's bedroom. To an adult, a noninitiate, it looked like a trash heap—but there was a comforting order inside for those who cared to delve past the superficial. It would never appeal to the Rolls Royce trade, yet was not quite as bad as the kung-fu sleaze pits of downtown L.A. which looked as though they had been razed by Mongols. The Omicron was, in essence, a “normal” theatre stripped down for combat, its patrons exemplars of the no frills class.

Jack assumed the seats were veterans of less fortunate film emporiums long since demolished. The heavy draperies, colorless with dust and age, had been hanging around since 1930. The concrete floor had been scoured clean of carpeting ages ago and remained unpainted; two-dollar customers spilled an awful lot of crap. During intermissions the auditorium lit up from behind; two emergency floods on battery banks comprised the sole interior illumination. They were mounted high on the corners of the projection booth like devil horns, and when they clicked on they threw long shadows from the heads of the audience all the way to the foot of the disused state in a silhouette mimic of a churchyard's listing headstones. When those lights clicked off, you'd better be sitting. Jack knew, because here there no niceties like usher bulbs on every other row, or twinkling blue “landing lights” on the aisle like he'd seen at the Vogue Theatre. Even the EXIT signs on each side of the screen were long dysfunctional.

And if the snack bar had been a restaurant, Jack would have found a Grade-C certification ditched behind the clotted Coke machine. He suspected that the roaches flatbacking it, feet-up in the yellow light of the candy counter's display pane, were victims of the popcorn.

The Omicron was practically Jack's only acknowledged watering hole. Like him, it was tatty in patches and looked broken down, but he could pass its portals and trade nods of recognition with the dude he had met at the magic shop, and that was important. He was a regular here, an initiate, and he appreciated that the caretakers of this dump, unquote, took pains where they counted—with the programming, and the quality of the projection.

Oh, yeah—and admission was still two American bucks.

Jack's terrific feeling of renewed well-being evacuated through his bowels and good knee when he plunked down his free pass at the booth and looked directly up into the varnished, wine-bottle-green eyes of the new Omicron employee.

From the third row he could barely see the screen. The crash-and-bash din of the gangster movies could not etch his concentration even in the

darkness of the theatre. The tarpaulined shapes in the orchestra pit became ominous; the auditorium, an ambush waiting to happen. He slouched in his seat. His mind chased logic chains like a lab rat on the scent of good, putrid Limburger cheese. None of the available conclusions eased his shock by a mote.

He had shuffled dumbly through the lobby, knowing that to meet the gaze of the candy-counter employee, the dude, would now be to let the fear engulf him to the upper lip. Those flat, glassy stares, unwavering, unblinking, like the appraisal of a puff adder, came out of a tray in the Hollywood Magic Shoppe.

The Cong—a supernatural hive intelligence, they could blank a grunt's brain, make themselves invisible. Twelve-year-old commandos were kicking President Johnson's butt by proxy. The fear. It could ambush you in the dark.

(On the screen, Bruce Dern, twelve years younger, indulges a sadistic little flash of ultraviolence. Homosexual rape.)

The Omicron staff. Not shellshocked orts from the dead age of the flower child. Just . . . dead, perhaps? Certainly they seemed to feel of death, and smell of it. Fragile, with their mushroom-pale, coolly bleached skin and their fixed, shellacked eyes. Stinking of aftershaves, colognes, patchouli, any heavy oil or preservative base of alcohol. Moving, like—

The baby palm lizard he found at the base of a tree. The roiling chaos of maggots revealed when he flipped it over. The legless grubs filling the stomach cavity; their mad dining was what made the lizard appear to be moving. Its flesh remained as an envelope, papery and stiff, a lizard-shape to hide the fact of entrails long consumed. Its eyes were gone.

Crazy.

Motive, you dumb gimp! yelled his mind. Motive! The why of a fleatrap cinema overseen by ambulatory dead people, or whatever the hell they were. Certainly not to derail the world and the American Way.

(Robert De Niro, having spent an hour of screen time evacuating his skull with airplane glue, is discovered amid the marsh reeds, his spike in the dirt, a rubber lanyard still making the dead bicep bulge.)

A snap decision in the dark. Jack knew he had to investigate, to resolve. It was what he had always done.

He found temporary satisfaction in the glow bouncing back from the movie screen. One row back and five seats over, a black guy swaddled in a stinking fatigue jacket snored gutturally and no one told him to shut up or get out. In some of the wing chairs, the ones affording an uncomfortably slanted view of the screen, more wineheads dozed unchallenged, their feet on the chairbacks. The others this far forward (guys

with dates generally holed up farther back in the auditorium) seemed totally narcotized by the film. The date duos, the monster-movie preppies, and the good citizens would scurry out during the end credits, while the snoozing derelicts and street dregs of Tinseltown waited to be ushered out under duress. For a couple of bucks over the flat rate for Ripple, a spongehead could blow an entire day sleeping out of the weather and sucking up racy moving pictures. Where did one find zombie fodder? Just haunting the Hollywood streets like gray wraiths, filthy blankets rolled under one arm, with hollow eyes and vacant stares, hanging out long after the sideshow freaks and hookers and male hustlers vacated Hollywood and Sunset and Santa Monica in the predawn. One more bag lady, one more shopping-cart loon or religious burnout or sooty panhandler would never be missed.

Intermission came, and with it a few more truths. He slouched down when the auditorium floods blinked on, actually recoiling from the light because he did not wish to be singled out. The decision to stay after closing had already been made. During the second feature he must have touched the pistol in the pocket of his pea coat a hundred times, to ensure it still existed. He packed it around with him almost all the time now.

If trouble leapt out of the trees tonight, it was reasonable to allow that he could win a physical contest against the Omicron's scraggly human cinders, even with a missing leg. *Their* bones must be like communion wafers now, he thought, his hand seeking the gun unconsciously again.

It was a luxuriously heavy .45 automatic, Marine field-issue, and his practice had been to pocket it whenever he traveled on foot. Lately it lived in the pocket of the pea coat all the time. The sucker ate an eight-round clip and an extra slug was already in the chamber. It had frequently proven a ready deterrent to muggers, at least those marginally human. Provided his thesis was true, even artillery like the monster .45 could not kill someone already dead But it sure as hell was capable of blowing off arms and legs and heads at medium range, and they couldn't chase you if they didn't have legs.

Provided he could retreat efficiently without one, too.

He considered his chances as the second film, *Bonnie and Clyde*, began to unreel.

During one of its chaotic shootouts (Gene Hackman was about to get iced by the Feds), Jack changed seats, edging closer to the wall of curtain on the left side of the auditorium. As long as he was not in the firing line between a viewer and the luminous rectangle of the screen, he would never be noticed. He knew how to walk in the dark, even theatre-dark, even leaning on the damned cane and humping his surrogate leg along.

Once on the fringe of the farthest row of seats, he edged toward the nearest dead EXIT light. The suffocatingly musty curtains smelled like some abandoned library, and his nose tried to sneeze. He held.

In another minute the early leavers would be hurrying out. He avoided the stair railing leading to the push-bar exit, and angled behind the screen, and looked up to be confronted by a reversed tight close-up of a face thirty feet high. The boxy, flat-black speaker apparatus, its horizontal planes steeped in brown dust, directed its salvo away from him and out through the million tiny perforations in the screen. Out toward—

He felt a mad, directional itch skittering from his hairline, around one eye, over his nose. Stifling his cry of reaction, he slapped away the cockroach before it could hide in his mouth. Yeah, the curtains were probably alive with the goddamn things. He thought of them congregating in the trough of the filthy Coke machine after closing, leaving their egg cases in the drains, or mating in the cigarette butts and piss filling the john's two urinals. Did roaches mate or were they, what did you call it, parthenogenic? Hermaphroditic? He hated the damn things the way he hated breaking spiderwebs with his face, the way he hated the monster leeches and vampire mosquitoes he'd met across the ocean. Or rats.

Above him, the screen lit up with an end-credit roll. Backwards. He hunkered down and thought about rats for a minute.

The grunge theatre in Chicago is a sleaze-pit, cold as a corpse locker, in the bosom of the annual blizzards. Jack and two fellow renegades from Basic are celebrating their first-ever weekend passes by touring the Windy City. Their passes are thirty-five hours old; now they are in attendance at a triple-bill of skin-flicks aimed at the midnight-to-dawn beat-off crowd. The theatre is in the middle of a burned-out DMZ called Division Street. Swindler, grandly polluted on a fifth of George Dickel's finest 80-proof paint remover, re-dubs Chicago the Shitty City, tittering at the rhyme. Ford, equally blitzed, elaborates by making Chicago the Puckered Red Asshole of the Universe. Jack's laugh goes cheesy and sour; he pulls his boots up off the floor because he has spotted the rats quietly on the discarded candy boxes and popcorn tubs. In the middle film, a cowlike naked blonde accidentally sets fire to her bed with a smoldering reefer (the fire is a special effect that must have planed away half the film's \$1.98 budget), and she and her musclebound Latino buggerers flee the frame as a line of jet-gas fire sweeps along the bottom of the picture. Jack hears the squeals from the screen and realizes they are not part of the soundtrack. What must be dozens of rats have been surprised by the sudden flood of light back there, behind the screen. Unpleasant. The rodent army retreats into the dark, to mingle

with the audience. He watches a crushed soft-drink cup manipulate itself patiently across the cold stone floor. He gets up to leave.

Could there be rats in the Omicron? In California, maybe mice. A voice in Jack's head told him he was obfuscating. Rats did not worry him.

The house floods snapped on and the rest of the patrons herded noisily out. Jack waited, secreted behind the hanging curtains, weight at ease on his fake leg.

The EXIT door crashed shut—sheet metal hitting a wood jamb and rattling a loose push-bar—and did not open again. For sixty seconds he breathed shallowly, listening. Then he inched forward until he could see the auditorium under the glare of the floods.

There were perhaps ten derelicts out there, still snoring. Maintenance movements and sounds echoed toward Jack from the lobby area; then somebody—the new guy, the one with the bottle-green eyes—moved down the aisles, waking the bums up. *Excuse me excuse me you have to leave now.* Jack watched his progress; the same speech for each sleeper. They grunted. Some got the speech twice before reluctantly shuffling out. One nodded and resumed sleeping—the black guy in the fatigue coat. The Omicron employee moved to the next customer. Like shabby, ragtag Conestogas lurching west, they dragged themselves out, all except Fatigue Coat, who had been sitting behind Jack, and to whom the new employee gradually circled back.

Behind Jack, the curtains rustled, moving themselves. Drifts of thin dust sifted down. It might have been the vacuum effect of the front doors closing.

He looked, and saw the Omicron guy standing mutely over Fatigue Coat, watching him sleep, watching with those fixed eyes whose pupils never expanded or contracted. Watching with the head-cocked attitude and characterless gaze of a praying mantis surveying the struggle of a future meal.

The other made his way toward the pair, dressed exactly as Jack had seen him in the Hollywood Magic Shoppe. He had a baseball bat.

Budget security as well, Jack thought.

The curtains were still moving, wafting as if in an unfelt, warm breeze. There was a faraway, crackling-paper noise.

When the dude swung the bat against the back of Fatigue Coat's neck, it made a sound like five pounds of raw steak smacking a linoleum floor. Jack felt a sympathetic local jab in the area where his backbone met his skull, and the black guy did a forward roll to slump out of sight between the seats. They bent to lift him, and he came up as slack and limp as an abused mattress.

Another roach dashed in a zigzag across the back of Jack's hand. His reaction came an instant too late, and when he tried to brush it away he hit the curtain, and three of its buddies fell from the folds of cloth to the floor and scurried away. The crackling-paper sound, like hundreds of tiny, drumming fingers, was noticeably louder.

When he looked back, Fatigue Coat was being laboriously dragged toward the orchestra pit. Each Omicron dude had a leg. And a dark, wet, erratic smear was left in their wake, shining up from the concrete slope of the aisle. It was something the regular patrons would never notice anyway.

It sounded like rain, and Jack thought of the flea-pit movie house in Chicago. His vision of the movement in the orchestra pit resolved into a roiling whirlpool of scuttling brown bodies. Not rats. Roaches. Millions of roaches, swarming over each other in the dark maw of the pit. Not the killer cockroaches, the three-inch long monsters that could fly—merely the tiniest household vermin, multiplied a billionfold before his awed eyes. And around his feet. He saw them move in quietly scratching, brittle brown masses across the floor like a shoe-sole-deep tide of sentient mud. He thought of them detouring up his plastic leg, antennae probing. The hairs on his good leg prickled. He held. The leeches, the Stuka mosquitos, the goddamn kraits had been far worse, he told himself. The .45 automatic, polished to a dull sheen by the pea coat pocket, came out now, shaking in his hand. The shaking pissed him off.

He thought of them living in the seat cushions, the curtains, the cracks in the floor, the moldy planking and rafters, the termite-hollowed superstructure. More than enough breeding room, even if one did not count the snack bar . . .

The dude and the new employee heaved Fatigue Coat over the lip of the orchestra pit into the riotous, churning sea of chitinous bugs. He seemed to hinge at the waist, like one of those backward-jointed dummies used for the big jump in the cheapest films. He did not look real. Neither did the sheer mass of waiting roaches—at least three vertical feet of them, he saw now, swarming nearly to the rusted brass rail of the pit. They embraced the body hungrily. The last part of him to submerge into the attack of brown, bulletlike forms was his foot, toes protruding from a demolished sneaker wound with dirty friction tape. Then he was gone, gobbled up, and quickly.

The hammer of the quivering .45 was cocked now. The display below forced Jack to grip the gun tightly in his fist and cock it with his free hand. That was when he fumbled the cane. It dropped away, missing his grasp, and hit the edge of the stage, somersaulting into the open, its

rubber street tip bouncing it off the orchestra pit rail. It clattered to the bare concrete floor. Loudly.

The EXIT door was still at hand, but Jack did not try to stomp toward it. He had heard it being chained shut from his hiding place.

They came for him behind the Omicron screen, clumping in cadence up the exit steps like a two-man funeral procession, and found him backed against the wall, pistol rigidly thrust out before him, a scepter of power, a talisman against evil.

"No closer." His voice did not quaver. The gun was now steady; the threat was defined. His good leg held him locked to the stone wall.

The new employee's voice croaked in monotone: "Excuse me, but you have to leave now . . ." The bottle-green, glassy eyes stared at the dead space between Jack's head and shoulder.

Jack could not trust the light, but he was certain that the dude, the elder employee, smiled at him when Jack uttered the single syllable: "No." The grin was dry and lifeless, a manipulated, puppeteered thing, matching horribly with the fixed phoniness of the eyes and the memory of fragile, cured, dead flesh. He moved toward Jack purposefully, grin fixed, eyes fixed.

Second warnings were for bad movies, too. Jack cut loose his bonus cartridge.

The boom of the shot knocked more dust out of the curtains. It resonated inside the girderwork and made the steel cables securing the screen vibrate. Jack flinched. What even an unmodified .45 bullet could do to a human skull at medium close range was something seldom depicted in those movies, either. Basically, it made a little hole going in and a huge hole coming out. Frequently it could decapitate the aggressor. That was how Teller had bought it.

A perfect black dot appeared on the dude's forehead just over the right eye. The hair on the back of his head flew apart violently, followed by a cloud of brown, metallic chaff, like pulverized cardboard. It glittered in the air and settled. Then roaches began to boil out of the forehead hole. The grin stayed. The dude took another step forward.

Jack fired convulsively after that.

The eye exploded like zircon struck with a steel hammer. Dead teeth were blown east like stubs of shattered chalk. The head disintegrated into flaking quarters. Roaches flooded out from the neck stump.

Jack swung, dropped sights, and put a slug through the new employee's outstretched hand. No grimace of impact, but it spun him, and he lost balance and tumbled headfirst through the curtains into the orchestra pit. His buddy, sans head, was still tracking mindlessly toward

Jack. Jack squeezed off, and the point-blank blast tore away everything below the dude's left kneecap and sent it flying through the movie screen. He crumpled. Freed bus scattered for cover.

Hurdling along, pole-vaulting, actually, *click-thump*, he made it to the exit door without falling on his face. Roaches were crawling up his legs now. The case-hardened padlock hasp and tempered chain were no match for the bullet that kicked them apart, and Jack shoved the door, doubling it back against the outside wall with a crash. Outside, the paving was slick with rainwater; puddles gleamed back at him in the trapezoid of dim light surrounding his elongated shadow. Good. They hated water. He limped out into the alley.

He never saw the new employee, flailing pathetically in a waist-high quicksand of chewing insects, struggling to stand. Nor did he see the new employee's seams burst, to feed the flood tide now cascading over the fallen walking stick, testing, tasting, analyzing. Angrily.

The .45 burned in his fist. The loss of the cane pushed him into overexertion. *At least you've fought your last battle, soldier . . .*

Some guardian angel had abandoned a split half of broomstick in a garbage dumpster, and that helped get him home. He stopped often to slap at himself, and after about ten minutes he heard sirens.

The bottle of George Dickel's finest on the countertop was thoughtfully notched so a potential drinker might view how much stock remained. Of the eight ounces inside when Jack burst into the apartment, four vanished before he even sat down.

His leg relaxed at last, and he might have screamed. His breath whooshed out and he bolted down another shot straight and neat, letting his gut warm. Sweat dumbed up his clothing with dampness. He rested the .45 on the table, next to the open bottle, and in a few silent minutes he felt better, more relaxed. The gun had cooled.

Bam, he thought. *Bam, bam, bam, and the dude popped open and there they were, a hive intelligence, like the Cong, thriving under our noses, living off our garbage, our human garbage, and good old Jack Daniels Stoner had found out.*

He took another pull from the bottle. A slower-killing slug, he thought, looking again at the gun.

A hair was stuck to it.

Absently he moved to pluck it from the metal. It moved.

His insides jumped. It was protruding from the barrel, brown and thin and wavering, and it was not a hair.

He thought he saw a madly scurrying roach speed out of the mouth of

the gun. Quickly, he slapped at the bare table surface and strained to check the underside. Nothing. It was his imagination dropping into overdrive, fueled by the octane of whiskey. Nothing. The gun was clean.

But those little suckers sure run fast.

He did last rites for the bottle and shuddered. Then, grimly, he started on the leftover beer. Soon he fell asleep on the sofa of his neat, ordered, vermin-free apartment.

And when he woke he knew they had found him. He had ferried their scouts home with him, and now they had him.

His good leg ached horribly. He remembered the aluminum crutch, ugly and unused, still in the foyer closet. Before being fitted with his plastic leg, he had learned to use the crutch as a surrogate. He tensed before jerking open the closet door, and something tiny and brown dashed out of sight behind the jamb. He was certain he had seen this one. He grabbed the crutch, and again his peripheral vision noted quick, dark movement, but in the time it took to turn his head and focus, it was gone—hidden, out of the light.

The countertop! Leaning on the crutch, he humped feverishly across the room. More nothing.

“Damn it!” Frustration and panic lay in wait.

The pistol was still on the table, but not as he thought he had left it. Now its barrel was pointed at the chair where he had sat drinking. He knew there were at least three or four slugs still in the clip, minimum, and never in his life had he gotten bombed enough to leave any weapon idly aimed at himself, loaded or no.

From the cabinets, the spaces beneath the counter tiles, the interior of the stove, they monitored him. It was a reasonable assumption. He stopped the childish bullshit of trying to catch them, and started to proceed methodically.

He smacked a spare clip into the gun and reloaded the exhausted one before sliding everything back into the pea coat. He pocketed all the change he could scrounge. To leave became imperative—not to return to the Omicron, oh no, not unless one wanted to spend a few months posthumously helming the snack bar, but to get clear of the apartment before they had an opportunity to catch him napping. The quiet walls unnerved him now, pressed against him with the weight of a million tiny, impatient bodies. Most likely they were right above his head and he could not see them, like Teller.

On his way to the door he thought he’d spotted one on the tabletop, maybe the one from the gun. He ignored it. He would never be fast

enough to get the little mothers. But he could be fast enough, sharp enough, still to get out, to survive.

The night was still black and set. Droplet patterns from the a.m. mist accreted on the metal of his crutch. He walked. He proceeded methodically, with nowhere to go but *away*.

He was in the crosswalk at La Brea and Santa Monica when the headlights nailed him. An oilslick-black Buick Regal, filled with the resplendence of a coked-out pimp pilot and a pair of chromed hookers, stopped with its front tires over the white line. Jack saw that the riders were pretty jolly for three o'clock in the morning. He stared at them through the windshield, realizing they had no idea of what was happening.

An angry black face bared teeth through the open driver's side window. "Keep yo' goddamn hands off the car, mothafuckin' bum!" He floored the pedal. Jack heard the engine roar and jumped as the Buick ran the red and swerved back into the lane, ass-skidding like a slot car. The jibes, in high, ridiculing feminine voices, echoed behind.

He stood in the crosswalk, arms open. "No!" They thought he was a derelict, more of the human garbage washed up on the streets of downtown Hollywood. Like the winos in the Omicron, like Fatigue Coat. "You're *wrong*!" he shouted, and his voice bounced off the Thrifty's and the Burger King and the car wash, and the bag lady sleeping on the bus stop bench paid no attention. They all thought he was just another loon, yelling in an intersection at three in the morning, and he felt the crushing weight of the need to tell everyone the truth.

But the light changed, and he kept on moving because that was what he was trained to do. He was still the point man, the patrol's maverick; his job was to make practical decisions fast and act on them instinctively. As soon as he made the curb he thought he spotted a stray roach struggling up his pant leg in the wet neon glow of the DON'T WALK sign, and his fist instantly responded, swooping down to smash it. His plastic leg resounded with its characteristic, drumlike *thunk* as his hand flattened the bug into nonexistence. He fancied he felt a reflex tremor from the leg nerves that no longer existed, either.

His body skipped a breath and he froze. The sound his fist had made against his plastic leg was subtly deeper than usual—the difference in pitch between an empty glass and a filled one.

Jack's mouth dried up with amazing speed. His plastic leg has hollow, like the leg of a Ken doll. Lots of empty space down there where he could not see. Or feel.

He tore open his pea coat and jerked loose the straps that held the

prosthetic limb buckled fast to his ruined flesh. From somewhere down there another roach free-fell to land on its back, legs wiggling. Jack pivoted on the crutch and stomped it into the sidewalk cracks.

Keeling madly forward, he grabbed the leg by its jointed plastic ankle and heaved it in a clumsy cartwheel toward a litter basket next to the stoplight pole. He did not see it crash-land; he was watching another roach scurry into the sewer grating, wondering if it had come from him.

He left the leg there, jutting crookedly out of the litter basket, looking like a vaudevillian joke. By dawn some bag lady would scavenge it. Under the chancy light of the mercury-vapor lamps he had no way of telling whether the bugs he now saw scuttering about on his abandoned leg were from within the leg itself, or from the garbage already stinking in the overfilled basket. They swarmed and capered as though cheated.

Using his crutch, rather proficiently he thought, he moved purposefully on into the slick, black night. His pantleg fluttered crazily because it was empty, and for that very reason he paid it no mind.

Hands with Long Fingers

by Leslie Halliwell

Leslie Halliwell was born in Bolton in 1929, and he grew up against an industrial background in which splendid new cinemas contrasted with the poverty, unemployment and grime of real life. Since childhood Halliwell has been a film enthusiast. He ran specialized cinemas in Cambridge, became a journalist on Picturegoer, and was a publicity executive for the Rank Organisation. In 1959 he joined Granada Television as a film researcher and later became program buyer on the long-running Cinema series. Since 1968 he has been buying most of the feature films and series screened by the ITV network, and he makes a number of buying trips to Hollywood each year in search of material.

Well known in England for his books on television and film—these include Halliwell's Filmgoer's Companion, Halliwell's Film Guide, Halliwell's Television Companion, Halliwell's Teleguide, Halliwell's Movie Quiz, Halliwell's Hundred, and The Filmgoer's Book of Quotes—Halliwell would seem an unlikely author for a collection of horror stories. Or maybe not. After all, most writers of horror fiction also have a keen interest in films, so why not the reciprocal? Halliwell's first collection of supernatural stories, The Ghost of Sherlock Holmes (fittingly, the author lives in Surrey), displays a deep affection for the traditional and inventive talent of Halliwell's own. Leslie Halliwell is currently at work on a second such collection.

I DON'T USUALLY dream. What's more, until I met Paul Binet I had never in my life had an experience which might be considered supernatural. I took life as I found it; I enjoyed my work and my pleasure; I expected a scientific explanation for everything. Anything of value which I have accomplished has been in the way of shedding further light on obscure historical or literary events. I don't welcome mystery; I explain it away. In particular, I have exposed several frauds of a supposedly occult nature. Yet here I find myself setting down a series of events which defies rational analysis. Perhaps the very recapitulation of what happened, in chrono-

logical sequence, will help towards further clarification. But I suspect not.

When Emmanuel Hilary died in October, I was surprised to find myself invited by his son John to attend the funeral. Very surprised indeed. I knew the son only slightly. We were at Sidney Sussex together, though I think he was in fact a year my junior. At any rate we went to some of the same clubs. The father I knew not at all except from once attending his course of lectures on Italian architecture. John introduced us, and we had a drink together in the public house at the bottom of Mill Lane. In his last years old Emmanuel acquired the reputation of being a bit gaga. He squandered quite a lot of his considerable fortune on the restoration of a crumbling eighteenth-century villa near Florence. He died there. At the time I happened to be living in a rented cottage not far away, in a village on the slopes of Monte Morillo. I was researching a book on Cagliostro: not really my line, but one must find a way of paying the butcher's bills. When the invitation came, I hesitated for an hour, then sent a note of acceptance. In the circumstances, a refusal might have seemed discourteous. Besides, I felt instinctively that there was something behind the invitation. John must want to see me. Thirty years ago we had parted in Cambridge without so much as a handshake. Our only direct contact during the last decade was a club dinner after my series of radio talks on the occult; but I remembered him well as a man who did not suffer fools gladly, yet was himself more devious than intelligent. In urging me to visit his father's mansion he undoubtedly had some motive more significant than wanting me to help eat up the baked meats after sitting through a doleful church service in a faith that wasn't mine.

The Villa Fabricotti was hidden from the road. However much trouble Emmanuel had taken, its situation was such that it could never suggest anything but damp and decay unless the thick wood which surrounded it were cut down. It was a rambling three-story affair with some rococo additions; the basic design was rather vaguely Baroque. Some greenish creeper covered much of the outer wall and almost all of the gatehouse. The inner grounds were an unkempt wilderness of neglected fern and shrub. Hardly a cheerful place to die in, I reflected as my elderly Fiat plowed its way along the muddy drive after a morning storm. Although we were well into autumn the weather had suddenly turned oppressive, and I noted with distaste almost approaching alarm the presence of clouds of great heavy insects, several of which crashed fatally into my windscreen, leaving nasty gray smears. It was nearly noon; I was the last to arrive. I noted with some amusement that the expectant beneficiaries

were all present although none of them lived nearer than Westminster. They looked like people who would take no chances.

John welcomed me with rather exaggerated bonhomie. It quickly turned out that one of his reasons for asking me was that he hoped I would join him and four others as pallbearers on the short procession to the local church and graveside. I nodded agreement, but thought he might have warned me: some people think they need only to have an idea to see it done. He introduced his wife Madeleine, a middle-aged charmer who looked well capable of getting her own way. Other so-called mourners included his elder sister Wanda and her husband Henry Marling, a beaky, avaricious looking pair. Then there was Reginald Bell, Emmanuel's other son-in-law via a daughter long deceased; and Eleanor Cavendish-Warren, some sort of cousin, who was clearly approaching her eighties.

We accomplished the business of the day as speedily as we could. A young male mute walked in front of the coffin, and all the women behind. Only the servants seemed genuinely moved; the family's tears were of the crocodile variety. Afterwards there was a buffet back at the villa, giving me a further chance to observe my fellow guests as they masticated their rather disgusting hot osso bucco and cold garlic sausage, followed by what seemed to be a bread pudding of extremely leaden texture. For me the coffee and strega were the only enjoyable part of the meal, and after that I was thinking of taking my leave when John, perhaps sensing this, came over to sit by me and offer another drink. Whatever else was in his mind couldn't seem to find expression, so to cover an awkward pause I asked:

"Who is the little man in black with the long hands and pale eyes?"

I gestured briefly at a sober figure dwarfed by the marble mantelpiece. He toyed solitarily with his coffee spoon. His well-cut coat was thigh-length and looked Edwardian; it was devoid of buttons or lapels. You couldn't help noticing his hands before anything else: perfectly formed, with elegant fingers, they seemed to have been borrowed from a man twice his size.

"That's Paul Binet. He sat at the back of the church."

"Interesting-looking fellow. Is he French?"

"Half that and half Spanish, I think. He kind of goes with the house. Father found him a few years ago in New York, working in one of the museums, and took him on as a sort of librarian-companion. It seems he specializes in occult manuscripts, of which we now have quite a collection at the expense of the family fortunes. Mostly quite unreadable and

unsaleable, I think. As a matter of fact, that was my main reason for asking you over."

So it was out at last. I tried to look politely inquisitive.

"I have to go back to London in a couple of days, and I'm afraid business must go on even in the presence of death." I mentally confirmed my previous impression of John as a sanctimonious hypocrite. "After all, there are thousands of quite valuable books here, and I'm a complete Philistine. The family is rather afraid that Binet may try to get his hands on the choicest items, and I wondered whether . . . well, whether you'd be free to put some sort of valuation on them, give us a quick indication, anyway." John was trying to smile. "You know, tell us which ones to lock away."

I raised an eyebrow non-committally. "I *could* do that, I suppose."

"I didn't want to offend you by offering a fee, though do say if you'd like one. I thought you might prefer to take your pick of the books, say five hundred quid's worth, or seven-fifty if you like. You might even enjoy yourself."

I pursed my lips. "It's an agreeable enough suggestion, and I'd be glad to spend a day or two at it. Especially with a bottle from your cellar to lay the dust at lunchtime. But what about Binet? Won't he resent my poaching on his territory?"

John instantly showed his true colours. "Binet be damned. He's a servant in this house, and he'll do what he's told. The fact is, we none of us trust him. Maddy thinks he was trying to set the old man against us. However, it's over now, before any harm of that kind could be done. I've already seen the will, though we have to wait for the formal reading tomorrow." He collected himself and looked a little sheepish. "I say, I'm delighted you'll help us. Are you sure you wouldn't prefer a proper business arrangement?"

I shook my head. "Your first suggestion will be fine, and I promise not to cheat. Five volumes of my choice, to a total not exceeding five hundred pounds."

I came back next morning at ten, only to learn that the family lawyer had been delayed in Milan by some urgent court case, so the family mourners had to hang on and were clearly not happy about it. Nor was I, as it meant we'd all have to lunch together. John wasn't in, so the butler showed me straight to the library, a tall musty room with a richly ornamented ceiling. Its walls were crammed with decorated oak shelving, two banks of which projected into the centre to be joined by an ornamental arch. Left alone with a flask of coffee, I opened some windows and set to work. Of the seven thousand-odd books in the room,

I quickly calculated that more than half were too modern to have any significant value; so I noted the position of the rest and got busy on them. Despite a certain orderliness—in some sections the Dewey system had been adopted—some sections seemed very curiously classified. Suddenly my attention was drawn by three bulky unabridged copies of Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, in different ornamental editions. I stepped into the alcove which housed them, and found myself surrounded by a vast number of volumes on the occult, constituting in total so great a proportion of the library as to overbalance it completely. They ranged from paper-covered how-to-do-it manuals of conjuring tricks to a few privately printed volumes of black magic rituals, including an item which totally took my breath away, a complete seventeenth-century rubric for the black mass. There were books about spirit-raising, zombies and voodoo, human sacrifice, witchcraft through the ages, and every other aspect of the supernatural you might think of in a nightmare. An odd collection indeed to find in the house of a man just buried, who presumably might have gleaned from his library enough skills to transcend the barrier of death.

My attention was suddenly distracted by a light slapping or clapping noise. I was so concealed by the alcove that I might have been hiding there. I stepped out to find Binet standing at one of the open windows which surveyed the terrace. He had his long tapering hands half stretched out before him, almost as though he was applauding. I couldn't see any sense in the action at first, then I realized what he was doing. I have mentioned the very furry insects which banged and squashed themselves against the windshield of my car on my first arrival. It seemed now that there was a small swarm of them outside the window, and Binet was catching them in his hands! Not killing them with a clap, but capturing them in his deft long fingers, cupping them carefully one at a time, and transferring them to a kind of glass case which stood on a nearby desk, opening and closing it while he inserted the struggling insect with a stylish flick of his supple fingers. As I moved closer I could see fluttering inside the case half a dozen of the unpleasant creatures, and a couple more dead on the bottom. Suddenly he became aware of my presence and was so startled that he let his last captive free. It flew off into a dark green bush.

"What on earth do you want those things for?" I asked almost involuntarily.

His eyes rolled a little, his mouth opened silently, and he shook his head from side to side. "It is nothing," he murmured. "An experiment, only an experiment. And you? You were . . . looking for something?"

Something about the way he looked up at me suggested a dog which

knows it is about to be beaten; something else suggested a dangerous animal about to spring in its own defense. In that second Binet's whole personality seemed to be exposed. I knew that I could never forget the slightly hunched shoulders, the crew cut hair, the sallow complexion, the suspicion of an accent in his otherwise impeccable English diction. I judged him to be in his mid-forties, though there were aspects which might have made him twenty years younger or ten years older. I was repelled by the hatred which clearly seethed in his pale eyes. Yet I had no doubt whatever that he had cared more than any member of the family for the well-being of old Emmanuel. He had that distrust of outsiders which is the hallmark of the perfect servant. Blood may be thicker than water, but love is thicker than either, and devotion to duty is a kind of love. So I admired him; yet there was something unsettling about him. I feared him; yet I understood him. The truth is perhaps that I instinctively sensed between us a kind of empathy despite the fact that it would have been difficult to find two human beings more outwardly different. I stress the word empathy rather than sympathy. My feeling was only that somehow Binet and I were on the same plane. We would understand each other yet not necessarily agree. This feeling of mine, after only a few seconds of conversation, seems more than a little related to the curious events which followed.

I quickly discovered that even though John may have mentioned my likely presence in the library, he had not explained it. Privately cursing my college friend, I spun Binet a yarn about John's wanting to make use of the presence of an alleged expert to give a general view on the interest of the collection. Binet listened attentively but was clearly not convinced. He shrugged politely at my apology for trespassing on his preserves, and finally shook his head. "It is not your fault. Not at all. I am aware that they do not trust me." His eyes opened wider in private amusement, and the pupils gleamed. "But they may find that there is a small surprise waiting for them. And then the world will know whom Emmanuel really trusted."

There seemed no answer to so naïve a threat. The words had been delivered lightly, yet they chilled and silenced me. I thought afterward that perhaps he had not intended me to hear them. Perhaps the truth was that he did not care whether I heard them or not. Abruptly he turned from me and left the room, making no more noise than the breeze which whistled outside among the cypresses. As the door closed behind him, my eyes fell to the strange little glass case in which a few insects still struggled while five now lay dead. I forced myself to examine the species more closely. Horrible things they were, something over an inch long,

with long jointed flealike legs, a furry abdomen and wavering antennae. What could be Binet's purpose in collecting such revolting objects? Deciding that more prolonged study of them would spoil my appetite for lunch, I made to return to my task. As I did so, my hand touched a book which was lying open on the corner of Binet's desk. It was in French. The title was *La Transférance du Mort*.

The funeral had been on a Wednesday. I worked on the library throughout Thursday and the first part of Friday. It was toward lunch-time on that day the bombshell dropped. I was aware that the lawyer from Milan had arrived, and that he was in conclave with the family. It had just occurred to me to wonder whether the will had contained any surprises when I heard the scrape of several chairs on the parquet floor upstairs. As I crossed the hall with the intention of washing my hands and taking a stroll before lunch, John came running down the staircase in an excess of bad temper. His face was like a thunderstorm. He had to say something as I innocently confronted him. What he said was: "Binet's got it! The whole damn lot! May the old man rot in hell!"

I never sought the whys and wherefores of the business. There was no putting up with the gloomy vindictiveness of the family any more than with the gleeful triumph of Binet. As I packed up, taking with me only two books instead of the five agreed, John told me merely that two wills had been found. The first gave the house to John and divided the fortune fairly evenly between him and the rest of the family, with a decent but not overwhelming bequest for Binet. The second and later document, lodged with the lawyer only weeks before the old man's death, left everything, apart from small gifts and charitable donations, unconditionally to Binet. Not only did the family fail to get what they expected, none of them was even mentioned.

For the next month or more my literary researches took me only briefly to London; then I was off again to Liechtenstein, San Marino, and finally Copenhagen. Occasional phone calls to friends kept me current with what was happening in the Binet affair. Predictably, the will was being contested by the family on the grounds that the old man was of unsound mind when he made it. I passed through Florence in early December, and once drove past the old house, but it seemed empty, though the old padre whom I met in the street told me that so far as he knew Binet was still in residence. Just in time for Christmas I flew home. Among the letters awaiting me was a note from John to let me know that the second will had been successfully revoked, and that Binet had been given notice to quit.

It was during that night that the dream came to me. I would have attributed it to tiredness, overeating or incipient influenza had it not been so very vivid, like a beautifully photographed film. It began with Binet's face, in what I suppose I have to call close-up. Heavily shadowed, malign, evil. He was saying something which I could not quite catch, but then the "camera" drew back and there was I, with my back to it, listening to him. We were in the library of the Villa Fabricotti, standing near his desk by the window. He wore what appeared to be the same black suit, the one with no lapels, and rather to my surprise he seemed to be drunk. With the curious certainty of dreamers I ascribed his condition, for some unknown reason, to the effects of calvados. Some of the shelves were empty, but the occult section was undiminished. Most of the furniture was thick with dust. Even in my dream the atmosphere was unbearably claustrophobic: I longed to get out into the fresh air. A small bed in the corner had been slept in but not made up.

"You live very simply," I said, my voice echoing around the room.

Now I could hear him. "Simply, my friend?" he hissed. "It is the others who are simple. Binet won before, and he will win again. You know my plan. Now I shall carry it out!"

"Plan?" I said vaguely. "What plan do you mean?" But he had already turned away to the desk, and when he faced me again his hands held the wooden box with glass panels in which I had seen him trap the gray insects. I took a step backwards in revulsion, but it was full of the damned things still.

"I shall show you, my friend," said Binet almost maniacally, "what good friends these creatures are, how they help to ensure that justice is done. The Hilarys think they have won, but my reach is longer than they can imagine. Watch!"

I can't remember exactly how he did it without freeing all the insects, but suddenly he selected one and held it by the wings, so it struggled between the fingers of his left hand. A truly monstrous sight in the precise detail now afforded to me. With his free hand Binet drew from some part of his clothing a long pin.

"What the devil . . ." I exclaimed.

Binet smiled, almost sweetly. "Precisely," he said, driving the pin through the body of the insect, which reacted violently before shuddering into lifelessness. "You see before you the remains of Mr. John Hilary!"

I was truly shocked. "You raving lunatic!" I said viciously.

Binet grinned foolishly at me, sweat standing out on his forehead as he held aloft on its pin his little victim. "We shall see," he murmured with

a sudden appearance of exhaustion. "And now, my friend, I think you had better leave . . ."

Suddenly I was running in fear down the overgrown drive, and behind me I heard insane, helpless, convulsive laughter which I knew to be Binet's. In my mind's eye I saw him opening a drawer in which, carefully laid out on white silk, were six small circles of coloured material, edged with darker thread. On one of these he laid the insect he had killed, and closed the drawer. Superimposed on this image there faded in an old-fashioned newsboy walking quickly through the streets, waving at passersby and shouting: "JOHN HILARY DEAD! JOHN HILARY DEAD!"

I woke up at this point, and hurried for a bath as hot as I could stand it. Anything to wipe away the memory of that dream. I took my long-suffering wife, who had by agreement retired before my midnight arrival, a cup of tea. She promised breakfast in thirty minutes. Meanwhile, still obsessed by the dream, I felt that I must try to contact John Hilary and see that he was in good health. It worried me that much. I had his Haywards Heath number in my book, and dialed it twice, but there was no reply. I looked up the London phone book but there were five John Hilarys. By the time breakfast was ready I was feeling somewhat calmer, but as my wife poured the tea she remarked, after asking about my trip home:

"By the way, didn't you say something last time you were home about meeting some people called Hilary? John and Madeleine?"

I nearly burned my mouth on the tea. "Yes. I went to his father's funeral. What about them?"

"I'm sorry to say they were killed in an air crash. It was in yesterday's paper. I kept it for you."

I grabbed the newspaper with an apparent rudeness which astonished my wife. There indeed were their names, among thirty-eight victims of the Paris air crash I'd heard about, with enough further detail to identify them beyond doubt.

All shocks fade. I had ceased to think very much about the event, and had almost forgotten my dream, when in mid-January I noticed in the *Times* obituaries the rather unusual name of Eleanor Cavendish-Warren. There was no doubt that she was the Hilary I had met; though seventy-eight, she had died suddenly and unaccountably while wintering on Cap Ferrat. Later in the month I read casually of a fatal car accident involving one Henry Marling and his wife. It took me a whole afternoon to remember where I had heard the name before. I felt like a man trapped in a recurring nightmare. Of all the beneficiaries under old Emmanuel's will, only one was still alive: Reginald Bell. I had to warn him, yet I knew

almost nothing about him. Remembering, I thought, his saying that he was an architect, I finally tracked him down to an office in the city. His secretary when she answered was reserved, sorrowful, and proper. She was sorry to tell me that only two days ago her employer had succumbed to a heart attack while holidaying on a Nile cruise.

I was afraid to go back to Florence. I was afraid of meeting Binet. It was the end of May before I made the journey, on account of a final piece of research which could only be achieved there. My wife came with me: not exactly for protection, but because I didn't want even to think about my previous visit. On arrival, however, the city and countryside seemed so serene that my fears vanished, and two days later I was recklessly driving along the main street of Monte Pareto, approaching the gateway to the Villa Fabricotti. My sensitive stomach rumbled distinctly as I pulled up near a sign informing me that the place was to let or for sale.

I asked some nearby workmen if they knew that had happened to Paul Binet. Yes, they said, he was dead. Found in the grounds on the morning he was due to pack up and go. Stiff as a board, with a purple face and a terrible expression on it. They didn't know what happened to the books, but a lot of the articles from the house, apart from the very valuable ones which had been taken away, had been put up by the lawyers for sale through a local merchant.

I found the shop without difficulty, and wandered uneasily around it. I recognized odd pieces of occasional furniture, including a wrought-iron standard lamp which had been in the hall. I was about to leave when in a corner, resting on the second shelf of a whatnot, I glimpsed an object which riveted me to the spot. Despite my revulsion I had to walk over and pick it up. It was a glass dome about six inches high, and its contents had last been seen in my dream. Sticking up from the base on a wire frame were arranged what might have been six tiny, grotesque dolls. They wore gaily coloured capes, and looked as though they were about to play ring-a-ring-a-roses. At first and even second glance it was possible not to notice that the dolls were really insects.

Weird Tales

Fred Chappell

Fred Chappell was born in Canton, North Carolina in 1936. He took degrees in English literature at Duke University, and he currently teaches science fiction and other subjects at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro. To date Chappell has published eight volumes of poetry, five novels, and Moments of Light, a collection of short stories which includes one about Franz Joseph Haydn as a space traveler. Formerly quite active in science fiction (he wrote for Robert Silverberg's Spaceship and Harlan Ellison's Dimensions), Chappell is now far better known (and widely respected) in literary circles.

His novel Dagon, although totally overlooked by fantasy/horror fans in the United States, was a critical success in literary circles and highly regarded in its French translation. Dagon is a rendering of the Cthulhu Mythos in modern literary terms. It is also the best novel ever written in this subgenre. Bar none. Fred Chappell's story "Weird Tales" is an homage to two of the writers he most admires. It is also an uncanny blending of fact, supposition, and paranoia. This is not the usual Cthulhu Mythos tale, despite the use of Lovecraft and others of his circle as actual characters. Don't read it if you're feeling depressed.

THE VISIONARY POET Hart Crane and the equally visionary horror story writer H. P. Lovecraft met four times. The first time was in Cleveland on August 19, 1922, in the apartment of a mutual acquaintance, the mincing poetaster Samuel Loveman.

It was an awkward encounter. Loveman and four of his idle friends had departed around eleven o'clock to go in search of a late supper. Lovecraft was sitting in an armchair under the lamp, a calico kitten asleep in his lap. He declined the invitation to accompany the others because he would not disturb the kitten; cats were one of his numerous manias. Shortly before midnight, Crane blundered into the room. He was enjoying this night one of his regular fits of debauchery and was quite drunk.

"Lo," he said, "I'm Crane. Where's Sam?" He took no notice of

Lovecraft's puzzled stare, but raked a half-dozen volumes of Rimbaud from the sofa, lay down and passed out.

Lovecraft was quite put off, though the poet's quick slide to oblivion had spared him a dilemma. He would have had to rise in order to present himself, and thus awaken the cat. Lovecraft insisted upon precise formality of address; it was part of his pose as an eighteenth-century gentleman sadly born into the Jazz Age. He was a fanatic teetotaler, and Crane's stuporous condition filled him with disgust.

When Loveman and two companions returned a half hour later the cat had awakened and Lovecraft set it gently on the floor, rose, and walked to the door. He paused and pointed a finger at Crane, at the ungainly form overpowered with gin and rumped by the attentions of sailors. "Sir," he said to Loveman, "your friend is a *degenerate*."

The effect of this melodramatic sentence was marred by the quality of Lovecraft's voice, a tremulous squeak. Loveman giggled. "Then I'm a degenerate too, HPL," he said. "Maybe we all are. Maybe that's why no one takes us seriously."

Lovecraft's reply was a toss of his unhandsome head. He closed the door and walked out into the night, walked the seventeen blocks to the YMCA, to his cheerless room and narrow bed. He undressed and, after carefully laying his pants between the mattress and springs for pressing, fell asleep and began to dream his familiar dreams of vertiginous geometries and cyclopean half-gods, vivid dreams which would have been anyone's else's sweat-drenched nightmares.

After two days Lovecraft and Crane met again and attended a chamber music concert. Crane was sober then and Lovecraft was quite charmed by his company.

It was an odd group of literary figures, these poets and fiction writers stranded like survivors of shipwreck on what they considered the hostile strand of American philistinism. They were not much congenial in temperament or purpose, but they all shared a common interest in newly discovered, newly reconstructed, mythologies. They felt the need to posit in history powerful but invisible alien forces which had made contemporary civilization such an inhumane shambles.

Lovecraft's mythos is the most widely known. In a series of fictions soon to appear in the venerated pulp magazine *Weird Tales*, he told of several eras of prehistory when mankind vied with monstrous races of creatures with extraordinary powers for a foothold upon the Earth. Man's present dominance was accidentally and precariously achieved; those alien beings were beginning to rearise from their dormancy. Lovecraft delineated a cosmos that threw dark Pascalian doubt on the proposition

“that such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all.”

Hart Crane’s mythology was not systematic; in fact, it was hardly articulate. His sensibility was such that he was unnerved in his brushes with the ancient presences he detected, and he could not write or think clearly about them. But his old friends were interested to note in his later poems the occurrence of such lines as “Couched on bloody basins, floating bone/ Of a dismounted people” Crane believed that Poe had gained best knowledge of the Elder Dominations and so paired him with Whitman in *The Bridge* as a primary avatar of American consciousness.

The most thorough and deliberate of these mythologers was Sterling Croydon, who might have stepped from the pages of one of Lovecraft’s stories. He was such a recluse that not even Samuel Loveman saw him more than once or twice a month, though he occupied an apartment in the same building with Loveman, on the floor above. Croydon rarely ventured from his rooms; all those volumes of mathematics, physics, anthropology, and poetry were delivered to his door, and he prepared his scant meals with spirit lamp and hotplate. He was gracious enough to allow occasional visitors, never more than two at a time, and Loveman would spend an evening now and then listening to Croydon elaborate his own system of frightening mythologies. He had been excited to learn that Lovecraft was coming to visit in Cleveland, abandoning for a week his beloved Providence, Rhode Island, and spoke of a strong desire to meet the writer. But when Lovecraft arrived, Croydon withdrew, fearing, no doubt, that to meet the inheritor of Poe’s mantle would prove too great a strain on his nerves.

He didn’t appear a nervous or high-strung person, but rather—like Lovecraft—a formal gentleman and the soul of composure. He was fastidious and kept himself neatly dressed in dark wool. He imagined that he was painfully photosensitive and ordinarily resorted to dark glasses. His complexion was pale and often flushed, his frame slender almost to point of emaciation, his gestures quick but calculated. Yet there was a dreamy magnificence about him and when he held forth on various points of Boolean algebra or primitive religion Loveman felt that he was in the presence of strong intellect and refined character, however neurasthenic.

It was Croydon’s contention that his colleagues had but scratched the surface of the problem. He had read Tylor, Sir James Fraser, Leo Frobenius and had traced their sources; he knew thoroughly the more

radical attempts of Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, Hazel Heald, F. B. Long, and others, but considered that they had done no more than dredge up scraps and splinters. He was convinced that one of Lovecraft's principle sources, the *Pnakotic Manuscripts*, was spurious, and that his descriptions of such cruel gods as Nyarlathotep and Yog-Sothoth were biased and vitiated by sensationalism and overwrought prose style.

He did not claim, of course, to know the whole truth. But he did know that Riemann's concept of elliptical geometry was indispensable to a correct theory and that the magnetic fluxions of the South Pole were important in a way no one had thought of. He had been eager to apprise Lovecraft of these ideas and of others, but at the last hour his shyness overcame him. Or maybe he had come to doubt the writer's seriousness.

We are forced to speculate about the outcome of this meeting which never took place; it might well have been of great aid to us, bringing to public notice Croydon's more comprehensive theories and engendering in Lovecraft a deeper sense of responsibility.

The one result we know, however, is that Croydon's life became even more reclusive than before. He almost never saw Loveman and his companions anymore, and no one was admitted now to his rooms. The single exception to this general exclusion was Hart Crane. Croydon thought that he saw qualities and capabilities in Crane lacking in his coarser-grained friends, and he would receive the poet at any time of the day or night. Drinking himself only a little wine, blackberry or elderberry, he kept a supply of gin for Crane, who never arrived sober and who would not stay unless there was something to drink.

So it was to Crane that Croydon poured out all his certainties, theories, and wild surmises. Almost all of it would have made no sense to Crane and would be distorted by his fever for poetry and disfigured by alcoholic forgetfulness. Yet he was impressed by this anomalous scholar and bits and pieces of those midnight disquisitions lodged in his mind. Perhaps Croydon's talk impressed him in a way it might not have done if he had been sober. The poet was interested in pre-Columbian history, he had always had a yearning for Mexico, and he was particularly taken with Croydon's notion that the Toltec, Mayan, and finally the Aztec religions were shadowy reflections of historical events that took place when mankind inhabited the Antarctic, when that region was steamy carboniferous forest. Those jaguar gods and feathered serpents which ornamented the temples had become highly stylized and symbolic, Croydon said, but long long ago, when man and dinosaur and other indefinable races coexisted at the bottom of the world, the first of these carvings and paintings had simply been attempts to represent literal

appearance. Those creatures, and many others of less producible aspect, had lived among us. Or rather, we had lived among them, as animal labor supply and as food source.

Crane discounted most of Croydon's notions. He did not believe, for example, that dinosaurs could have been intelligent warm-blooded creatures who had attempted to dislodge the alien gods who ruled among them. He did not believe the dinosaurs had died because their adversaries had infected them with an artificial bacterium which had spread like wildfire, wiping out every major saurian species in three generations. But he was fascinated by Croydon's accounts of tribal religions in South and Central America, caught up by the exotic imagery and descriptions of ritual. Croydon was especially excited by an obscure tribe inhabiting the upper reaches of the Amazon who worshipped a panoply of gods they called collectively Dzhaimbú. Or perhaps they worshipped but one god who could take different shapes. Much was unclear. But it was clear that Croydon regarded Dzhaimbú as the most anciently rooted of religions, in a direct decent from mankind's prehistoric Antarctic experiences.

Crane was impressed too by another of Croydon's ideas. This scholar disagreed vehemently with Darwin's charming theory that man had learned speech by imitating the mating calls of birds. Not so, said Croydon; man was originally a vocally taciturn animal like the horse and the gorilla, and like horse and gorilla uttered few sounds except under duress of extreme pain or terror. But these sounds they learned to voice quite regularly when Dzhaimbú inflicted upon them unspeakable atrocities, practices which Croydon could not think of without retching. Human speech was merely the elaboration of an original shriek of terror.

"'S a shame, Sterling," Crane said, "that you can't board a ship and go down to the jungle and investigate. I bet you'd turn up some interesting stuff."

Croydon smiled. "Oh, I wouldn't bother with the jungle. I'd go to the Antarctic and look for direct archeological evidence."

Crane took another swallow from his tumbler of neat gin. His eyes were slightly unfocused and his face was flushed and his neck red in the soft open collar. "Shame you can't go to the South Pole then, if that's where you want to go."

"No, I shouldn't make a very able sailor, I think," Croydon said. "But, after all, there are other ways to travel than by crawling over the globe like a termite." And now he launched into a description of what he called spatial emplacement, by which means a man sitting in his room might visit any part of the Earth. All that was required was delicate manipulation of complex and tenuous mathematical formulae, prediction of solar

winds, polar magnetic fluxions, cosmic ray vectors, and so forth. He began to pour out a rubble of numbers and Greek letters, all of which Crane disregarded, suspecting that they'd struck now upon the richest vein of his friend's lunacy. Croydon's idea seemed to be that every geographical location in the universe could be imagined as being located on the surface of its individual sphere, and that the problem was simply to turn these spheres until the desired points matched and touched. Touched, but did not conjoin; there would be disaster if they conjoined. The worse complication was that these mathematical spheres, once freed of Euclidean space, were also free in time. One might arrive to inspect Antarctica at the time he wished, which would be pleasant indeed; or he might arrive in the future, uncountable millennia from now. And that would be dangerous as well as inconvenient.

But all this murmur of number and mathematical theory had lulled Crane. He was asleep in the club chair. Croydon woke him gently and suggested that he might like to go home.

"Yeah, maybe I better," Crane said. He scratched his head, disheveling again his spiky hair. "But say, Sterling, I don't know about this travel by arithmetic. Better to get a berth on a ship and sail around and see the birds wheel overhead and the slow islands passing." The thought struck his enthusiasm. "That's what we'll do one of these days. We'll get on a ship and go see these jungles."

"Good night, Hart," Croydon said.

This impulsive voyage was never to take place, of course, Crane's poetry had begun to attract important critical notice, and he soon moved to New York in order to further his melancholy but highly distinguished literary career.

Croydon remained behind to pursue his researches ever more intensively. He was quite lost sight of to the world. Loveman would occasionally stop by to call but was not admitted.

It was on one of these infrequent visits that he felt a strangeness. The hall leading to Croydon's room seemed chilly and the air around the door very cold indeed. And the door was sweating cold water, had begun to collect ice around the edges. The brass nameplate was covered with hard frost, obliterating Croydon's name.

Loveman knocked and knocked again and heard no sound within but a low inhuman moan. He tried the icy knob, which finally turned, but could not force the door inward. He braced his feet, set his shoulder against the door and strained, but was only able to get it open for the space of an inch or two. The noise increased—it was the howling of

wind—and a blast of numbing air swept over him and he saw in that small space only an area of white, a patch of snow. Then the wind thumped the door shut.

Loveman was at a loss. None of his usual friends was nearby to aid him, and he would not call upon others. He belonged to a circle in which there were many secrets they did not wish the larger world to know. He returned to his rooms on the lower floor, dressed himself in a winter woolen jacket and scarf and toboggan. After a brief search he found his gloves. He took a heavy ornamental brass poker from the hearth and returned to Croydon's door.

This time he set himself firmly and, when he had effected a slight opening, thrust the poker into the space and levered it back. The poker began to bend with the strain and he could feel the coldness of it through his gloves. Then the wind caught the edge of the door and flung it back suddenly and Croydon found himself staring into a snowy plain swept over by fierce Antarctic wind.

It was all very puzzling. Loveman could see into this windstorm and feel some force of the wind and cold, but he knew that what he felt was small indeed as compared to the fury of the weather he could see into. Nor could he advance physically into this landscape. He could march forward, pushing against the wind, he could feel himself going forward, but he did not advance so much as an inch into that uproar of ice and snow.

It is in another space, he thought, but close, very close, to my own.

He could see into it but he could not travel there. In fact, with the wild curtains of snow blowing he could see little, but what he could see was terrible enough.

There, seemingly not twenty feet from him, sat Croydon at his desk. The scholar was wearing only his burgundy velvet dressing gown and gray flannel trousers and bedroom slippers. The habitual dark glasses concealed his eyes, but the rest of his face was drawn into a tortured grimace.

Of course Loveman shouted out *Croydon Croydon!* knowing it was useless.

He could not tell if his friend was still alive. He did not think that he could be. Certainly if he were in the same space as this Antarctic temperature, he must have died a quick but painful death. Perhaps he was not in that space but in a space like Loveman's own, touching but not conjoining this polar location. Yet the Antarctic space intervened between them, an impassable barrier.

He wished now that he had paid more attention when Croydon had

spoken of his mathematical ideas. But Loveman, like Crane, had no patience with, no talent for, numbers. He could never have understood. And now those pages of painstaking calculation had blown away, stiff as steel blades, over the blue ice sheets.

He thought that if he could not walk forward then he might crawl, but when he went to his knees he found himself suspended a couple of feet above the plane of the floor. Something was wrong with the space he was in. He stood, dizzily, and stepped down to the floor again, and the descent was as hard a struggle as climbing an Alpine precipice.

There was no way to get to Croydon, and he wondered if it would be possible to heave a rope to him. If he could find a rope.

But there was no way to reach the scholar. He had begun to recede in space, growing smaller and more distant, as if caught in the wrong end of a telescope. And the polar wind began to effect a bad transformation. The dressing gown was ripped from Croydon's body and he was blackening like a gardenia thrown into a fire. His skin and the layers of his flesh began to curl up and peel away, petal by petal. A savage gust tore off his scalp and the blood that welled there froze immediately, a skullcap of onyx. Soon he would be only a skeleton, tumbled knob and joint over the driving snow, but Loveman was spared this spectacle. The frozen figure receded more quickly and a swirl of ice-grains blotted away the vision. Croydon was gone.

Loveman made his way into the hall, walking backward. His mouth was dully open and he found that he was sweating and that the sweat had begun to ice his clothing.

There came a crash as of thunder, the smell of ozone, and the Antarctic scene disappeared from the room and there was nothing there. Literally, nothing; no furniture, no walls, no floor. The door with Croydon's nameplate hung over a blue featureless abyss. There was nothing, no real space at all.

Loveman gathered his courage, reached in, and pulled the door closed. He went quietly down the hall, determined to get back into his own room before others showed up. He did not want to answer questions; he did not want anyone to know what he knew. He wanted to go to his room and sit down and think alone and reaffirm his sanity.

The disappearance of Croydon and of that part of the apartment building caused some little public stir. The recluse had no relatives, but scientists were interested as well as the police. Loveman avoided as best he could any official notice, and in a few months the event was largely forgotten, since the scholar's room returned to its original state, everything restored but Croydon himself.

But the occurrence was not forgotten by the circle of Loveman's friends. For them it was a matter of great concern. They feared that Croydon's experiment had called attention to themselves. Would not those alien presences whose histories they had been studiously examining now turn their regard toward Cleveland? Had he not disturbed the web of space-time as a fly disturbs a spiderweb? It was true that they were indifferent to mankind, to species and individual alike. But there were some researchers who thought, as Lovecraft did, that the ancient race was planning a regeneration of its destiny and would act to keep its existence secret until the moment was ripe. The powers of these beings were immense; they could destroy where and when they pleased, as casually as a man crushes out a cigarette in an ashtray.

Loveman wrote about Croydon to Crane in New York, but his reference was veiled, seemingly offhand. "You have heard about C, I take it. We are all aware. Always good to keep your guard up, old chum. Word to the wise meanwhile. I wonder, you wonder."

It was actually at this early juncture that it all began to come apart; though the pursuit among the seers and poets was leisurely by human measure, it was relentless.

Lovecraft died in 1937, in painful loneliness. The official medical report listed the cause as intestinal cancer. Hart Crane's more famous death had taken place five years earlier, the celebrated leap into the sea.

The men had since met twice again, during the period of what Lovecraft had called his "New York exile." He was a little shocked at the changes in Crane's physical condition. "He looks more weather-beaten & drink-puffed than he did in the past," Lovecraft wrote to his aunt, "tragically drink-riddled but now eminent." He predicted that Crane would find it difficult to write another major work. "After about three hours of acute & intelligent argument poor Crane left—to hunt up a new supply of whiskey & banish reality for the rest of the night!"

Lovecraft records this encounter as taking place May 24, 1930. They were not alone and had no opportunity to talk privately, so that Crane would not have told the other what he had learned from Loveman of the circumstances of Croydon's death. He could not apprise Lovecraft that he alone was inheritor to Croydon's secret knowledge and that his identity must necessarily be known to that being, or series of beings, Dzhaimbú. He spoke of leaving New York and moving to Charleston, but Lovecraft did not pick up the hint, merely agreeing that such a move

might be beneficial. Perhaps Crane's gallantry prevented his placing the other in danger.

Another interpretation is possible. We may guess that Crane did communicate some of his information to the horror story writer. It is just at this period that Lovecraft's mythos began to take its more coherent and credible shape in such works as "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" and "The Dreams in the Witch House." Certainly both Lovecraft and Loveman remarked that Crane now lived in a state of haunted terror, wild and frightful, dependent upon alcohol to keep his fear manageable. Crane must have known that he was being pursued—the signs were unmistakable—and decided to face the terror on its own ground. For this reason he plotted to get the Guggenheim grant which would take him to Mexico.

But it was too late, alcohol and drugs had disordered his nervous system, his strength was gone. On the voyage to Mexico he met the celebrated bacteriologist, Dr. Hans Zinsser, and concluded that he was an agent of Dzhaimbú sent to infect humanity by means of typhus-ridden rats. Zinsser's motives in dumping infected rats into the harbor at Havana remain unknown, but it is hardly probable that Crane's suspicions were correct.

In Mexico the poet's behavior was uncontrolled and incomprehensible, a series of shocking and violent incidents that landed him often in jail and caused his friends to distrust any sentence he uttered. His decision to meet the terror face to face was disastrous; he could not stand up under the strain. No man could. And his further decision—to keep his knowledge and theories secret so as not to endanger others—was a worse disaster.

In the end, he fled, unable to face the prospect of coming close to the source of the horror. The voyage home began with dreams and visions so terrifying that he could not bear to close his eyes and stayed awake drinking continuously. Embarrassing episodes followed which he was numbly aware of but past caring about. On April 27, 1932, Hart Crane jumped from the railing of the *Orizaba*. The sea received him and the immense serpentine manifestation of Dzhaimbú, which had been following in the unseen depths of the water since the ship departed, devoured him.

This fabulous shadow only the sea keeps.

It is inevitable that we read these sad histories as we do, as a catalogue of missed opportunities and broken communications. A present generation righteously decries the errors of its forefathers. But it is unlikely that

any human effort would have changed the course of events. There would still have come about the reawakening of Dzhaimbú and the other worse gods, under whose charnel dominion we now suffer and despair.

The Wardrobe

Jovan Panich

Jovan Panich was born January 24, 1960 in Birmingham, England, where he currently resides. Of himself, Panich writes: "My mother is English and my father Yugoslav, hence the strange name. I've always had a love of science fiction, fantasy and horror, and when I was young I'd hunt all the local magazine shops for Marvel comics, which were superior to anything being published in Britain. I then moved on to books without pictures and read every Moorcock book in print. Other authors followed, Howard, Lovecraft, Leiber, and Tolkien to name but a few." His current favorites include Ramsey Campbell and Stephen King, whose works have influenced his own writing.

Panich has been writing since he was about seven, but only in the last few years has he written anything with a serious intention to see it in print. "The Wardrobe" was originally submitted to Mary Danby for one of the Fontana Book of Horror Stories. Panich later sent it to Lari Davidson, editor of the Canadian magazine, Potboiler, who had Panich revise the story several times before accepting it. Panich has had two other stories published in Potboiler, and another, "Miala," is set for a forthcoming issue of Undinal Songs.

THE CAR CAME to a halt beside the curb. The wipers juddered on the windscreen in shivering arcs, wiping away the last few drops of rain that still fell from a sky the color of iron.

The doors swung open and a man, a woman, and two boys climbed out. They all were dressed in black and looked uncomfortable in the stiffly formal clothes. The youngest boy pulled at the collar of his shirt, trying to loosen its grip on his throat. He was guided gently toward the door of the house by his mother. She wore a small black velvet hat with a veil that could not hide her eyes. They were puffed and red with crying. She inserted a key into the lock and pushed open the door.

"Go upstairs and get changed, Andrew. We'll be in in a minute." She spoke in a voice that was little more than a whisper.

Andrew clambered up the stairs on all fours, glad to be allowed to change out of the uncomfortable clothes. He went into his room and sat on the bed, tugged off his tie and then fumbled with the top button of his shirt for a long time before he managed to undo it.

Andrew sat looking out of the window at the sky still heavy with clouds. It had rained steadily during Granny's funeral. It had been so strange and disorienting. All the flowers, bright and colorful, and the people so drab, black. There had been a man who had said some strange words that Andrew didn't understand, in a slow, solemn voice, but was only pretending to be sad. And Andrew had looked around at all the people, his uncles and aunts and cousins. They all stood silent and unfamiliar, so that he was uncertain if they really were the people they were supposed to be.

After the man had finished speaking, they had lowered the coffin into the hole in the ground. Andrew had watched fascinated as the coffin descended jerkily on the ropes, thumping lightly as it hit the wet earth at the bottom. He wondered what it must be like to be in the dark cold ground, trapped in a shiny wooden box. Why did Granny have to be put in the ground like that, with all the worms and beetles and slugs? What had she done wrong?

He remembered Granny, a kindly old woman who sat in her chair by the fire and gave him sweets when he visited her. He could never remember her being bad, not even when he had broken the blue china teacup. Why, then, was Granny put into the coffin? He had asked his father when they left the graveside and were walking back to the car.

"Because she's dead, Andrew. Sleeping for a long time."

Andrew knew what being dead was like. It was like the cat he had seen near the rubbish heap, all stiff and covered in maggots, with blood and slimy stuff on its face and a smell that made him feel sick. Would Granny be like that when she woke up? He thought of himself being picked up and kissed by a mouth that was cold and soft and wet like squashed worms.

He felt scared then and was glad that Granny was in her shiny box under the ground and a long way away. He hoped it would be a long, long time before she woke up, and perhaps she would have forgotten him by then.

He finished taking off his best clothes, pulled on his jeans and the yellow t-shirt with a red racing car on it. Then he slipped his feet into a pair of sneakers that had once been white, and with a look of concentration on his face, slowly tied the laces.

He heard the front door close and the rest of the family make their

way into the lounge. Andrew picked up his suit and went over to the big wardrobe in the corner of his room, carefully hung the suit on its plastic hanger, and closed the door with a sharp click. He stepped back, looking at the wardrobe as if he were only now seeing it properly for the first time.

The wardrobe dominated the small room. It was out of place. All the rest of the furniture was simple and modern, plain and unpretentious. But the wardrobe belonged to a time past, an Edwardian, or perhaps Victorian, setting, where all the colors were rich and dark, and the air heavy with the musty scent of long-dry lavender.

It was made of oak, stained such a deep brown so as to be almost black. The twin doors had brass handles and were covered in fluting and carving that was cut deep into the wood, with fluid designs of entwined leaves and vines that seemed more like writhing serpents . . . or things found far beneath the ground.

It stood in front of him, shiny and dark, like the coffin they had buried with Granny inside. But this coffin wasn't under a layer of heavy soil pressed firmly in its place, it was here with him, in his room. What if there was something else inside, apart from his clothes? Something that had been asleep for a very long time . . . but was now waking up?

Inside the wardrobe, Andrew's jacket slid from the hanger and slithered down the inside of the door like the feeble movements of an old woman.

Andrew turned and fled from the room, almost falling down the stairs in his haste to reach his parents. He flung himself into his mother's arms as she sat on the sofa by the fire.

He sobbed and gasped, unable to speak for a long time. At last the words came. "She's not dead now. She's woken up, but I shut the door. Mummy, I'm scared!"

"Andrew! What are you talking about?" his father snapped. The funeral of his wife's mother had already been enough of a strain without any more worries.

"In the wardrobe! She's in the wardrobe!" Andrew almost screamed.

"Who's in the wardrobe? The cat? Is it the cat stuck in the wardrobe?" Andrew's father asked.

"No! Granny! Or maybe somebody else, crawling in the bottom of the wardrobe. Maybe they were dead, but now they've woken up."

His own confusion calmed him, as he tried to express his thoughts with what words he knew.

Andrew's mother looked at him, and then put her head in her hands and began to cry softly.

"They're dead. Why do I have to be reminded?" Her voice was hardly more than a whisper.

"Madeleine. Don't cry, darling," Andrew's father said gently, then turning to his eldest son, said, "Stay with your mother, Gary. Andrew, let's go upstairs."

He took firm hold of Andrew's wrist and led him back to his bedroom. With a savage pull he opened the doors of the wardrobe and made Andrew look inside.

"See? Nothing but your clothes, including your best jacket screwed up like a dish cloth." He picked it up and replaced it on the hanger, doing up one of the buttons to hold it in place. "Now let's go back downstairs, and not another word to your mother, she's been through enough these past few days. You and Gary can go and play in the other room with your toys, quietly mind, no noisy games."

As the two boys walked meekly past their father in the hall, Gary, who was eight, and as curious as a kitten, asked, "What did Mum mean when she said they were dead?"

"Her mother and father of course." He answered quietly, but he looked away even as he spoke and quickly stepped back into the lounge, shutting the door firmly.

Peter could still picture that day, a bright morning in early August. He had decided to decorate the spare room in readiness for the baby Madeleine was carrying. A little brother or sister for Gary. He had been moving the wardrobe out on to the landing, a slow and difficult job because of the wardrobe's size and weight. Madeleine had come out of the bedroom, seen him struggling, and asked if she could help. He had laughed, and replied, "In your condition?" and patted the prominent lump. And then he had lifted the wardrobe up at one end, slid it along the carpet. Somehow he lost his balance, stumbled, and it had toppled forward, pinning Madeleine against the wall. She screamed, a cry that had made his heart freeze. When he pulled the wardrobe away he thought she was dead, there was so much blood. The child had been a little girl.

Now the memory had been reawakened, and Peter wondered, deep down inside in a small and secret place, if there was perhaps something evil about the wardrobe.

The months passed, and the incident of the wardrobe was all but forgotten by Andrew. He still felt nervous about being in the room alone sometimes, and he would then have to open the wardrobe doors and slide the clothes to one side. After he had carried out this inspection and

decided that there was nothing hiding inside, he was quite happy to stay in the room. And after a time it became more like a ritual, akin to not stepping on the cracks between paving stones, devoid of any real meaning.

One evening in late autumn, Andrew was playing in his room with his electric train set. It was almost dark inside the room, only a hint of the afternoon still lingered in the patch of sky outside the window, but Andrew hadn't switched on the light because his new train had tiny headlights and illuminated carriages. In the gloom it looked almost like a real train as it hurtled round the track with its headlamps glinting on the rails.

Something made him turn, some movement on the edge of his vision. He looked at the wardrobe. The doors were half open. In the space between the clothes and the bottom of the wardrobe he could see a head. The face was gray and crumpled with years and there were only black patches where the eyes and mouth should be. It leered at him.

He began to scream, too frightened to run to the light switch. He kept on screaming, and the train went round and round the track relentlessly.

His father ran in and switched on the light. "Andrew! What is it? Have you hurt yourself?"

"In the wardrobe, Daddy. A ghost! A ghost!" He pointed wildly at the wardrobe, at any moment expecting the thing to come shambling out.

His father padded over to the wardrobe in his worn brown slippers and pulled the door open wider. Andrew was ready to scream again but he saw his dread apparition revolve into a gray shirt and the toecaps of a pair of shiny black shoes. They lay at the bottom of the wardrobe, so mundane and natural in the clear electric light. He felt foolish.

His mother ran into the room. Her eyes were filled with concern. "What's happened? Is he all right? Are you all right, Andrew?"

She saw the open doors of the wardrobe. The concern vanished from her eyes and was replaced by fear. "It's that *thing* again. That bloody *wardrobe*! I know it is! It's . . ."

Quickly Peter rushed to her and put his arm around her shoulders. "Andrew's okay. He just got himself caught up with his train set. He got frightened, but I've seen to it. There's nothing to get worked up about."

Madeleine nodded. "I'm sorry. I thought . . ."

"Shush. Don't worry. Now go downstairs and finish getting tea ready. We're all starving."

He forced a smile, and slapped her playfully.

As soon as she was gone the smile vanished. He gestured to Andrew

to switch off the train. Slowly Andrew stood up and sat on the edge of the bed. His father sat down beside him.

"Now listen to me, Andrew, because I'm only going to say this once, and then we're not going to mention it ever again. Understand?"

Andrew wet his lips with his tongue, and whispered, "Yes, Dad."

"You saw what happened to your mother when she thought something had frightened you. You could see how scared and worried she got. It made her cry and feel bad. I know you love her and don't want her to be upset . . ."

"It was the wardrobe, Dad. It frightened me again. I thought there was something inside it . . . like last time."

"For God's sake, Andrew! Don't be stupid! It's only a piece of furniture, like the table and chairs. You're not frightened of those, are you?"

Andrew lowered his eyes and said nothing.

"Don't you understand that you're frightening your mother? The two of you are scaring one another to death, feeding on one another's fears. It has got to stop. It *will* stop. Understand?"

"Yes, Dad." Andrew answered in a small voice.

Peter, remembering that he was talking to his youngest son, who hadn't yet reached his seventh birthday, sighed and tousled Andrew's hair. "Okay, son. Let's forget all about it and go and have something to eat."

Andrew did indeed try and forget all about the wardrobe, and for a few weeks all was well. December came, and with it a cold spell. A thick frost on the lawn crackled like newspaper when Andrew walked on it, and ice patterns covered the kitchen window when he got up for school. Christmas was fast approaching, bringing with it a fervent excitement. He hoped that he would get the radio-controlled sports car he had asked for. He would be the envy of all the other boys in his class.

Each night when he got into bed he thought that another day was gone and Christmas had moved a little closer. He was happy and excited. Sleep did not come easily.

Sixteen days before Christmas he had a terrifying nightmare.

He was walking with his brother Gary on the way to school. Gary was telling him how well he had done in the long jump the previous day. "I managed this tremendous leap—must have been nearly ten feet—I thought I was flying."

The two of them stepped through the doors leading to the classrooms. But they were suddenly in Andrew's bedroom.

Gary seemed unaware of the transformation, he continued walking. He stopped at the wardrobe with his back toward it. The doors swung

slowly and silently open. Andrew tried to speak, but his mouth seemed as if it were filled with a wad of cotton, and fear crushed his ribs. In his arms there was suddenly a great slab of cold granite, a gravestone, its inscription weathered and worn into an unreadable shadow. The stone was covered with lichen and damp earth . . . and something else. Wriggling maggots, fat and white, writhed blindly toward his fingers.

With a shuddering moan of loathing, Andrew threw the thing away from him. Gary's eyes went wide with horror as the heavy stone sailed toward him. It thudded into his chest. He fell backwards into the gaping blackness of the wardrobe, where something waited . . . The doors slapped shut.

Andrew woke up. The door of the wardrobe swung shut with a soft click that seemed to echo like a gunshot. Terror returned like a cat pouncing on its prey. He almost screamed, but his body was rigid, constricted by a breath that couldn't escape.

After long minutes had passed he found the courage to slide his hand out from under the protective covering of the blankets and switch on the lamp. He wanted to call for his mother, but he remembered what his father had said to him. He knew that he would have to remain silent. Andrew lay in his bed, staring at the wardrobe for a long time before uneasy sleep at last came to him.

In the comforting light of a bright, cold day, Andrew brooded on his nightmare, going over it again and again. Had it happened? Had the wardrobe doors swung shut when he had woken? He was certain the doors had been closed when he had gone to bed, and they were obviously closed now. The only possible answer was that he had still been half asleep after the nightmare had ended. One second asleep and dreaming the doors swinging shut, the next awake, and seeing the dark shape of the wardrobe in the beam of moonlight streaming through the gap in the curtains.

That afternoon he found Gary in the garden with his bicycle upside down. Gary was standing on the handlebars in an attempt to straighten them. Andrew rested his back against the fence and watched his brother.

Gary turned round and saw his brother shivering and watching. "You wouldn't feel cold if you were doing something instead of just watching. Stand on the other end of the 'bars and bounce up and down. With both of us together there might be enough weight to straighten it."

The two of them grunted and gasped, and eventually the metal bent back.

"Phew! That was hard work. How'd you manage to bend it like that?"

"I'd just finished delivering the papers and was on my way home, then

I hit a patch of ice on the corner of Bell's Lane. I went halfway across the road before I could grab the brakes and the bike went straight over and I landed on the handlebars."

He rubbed his chest.

"It doesn't half hurt. I bet I've got a great big bruise."

Andrew stared at his brother for a long time. "Gaz. I had a bad dream last night."

"That's nice. Get chased by a Dalek? Or was it a lump of man-eating purple jelly with fangs?" He made a face, showing his teeth.

"It wasn't anything like that. I dreamt that you fell inside the wardrobe in my bedroom . . ."

"Sounds really frightening," interrupted Gary.

"There was something in there . . . waiting. I don't know what, I never saw it, but it killed you," he finished lamely, unable to convey the sense of horror he felt.

"But you didn't fall into the wardrobe. I had this gravestone, it was all covered in maggots. I threw it away and it hit you . . . in the chest."

The laughter vanished from Gary's face. "You're lying. You made it up, didn't you? You're trying to scare me just like you scare Mum, with all that rubbish about the wardrobe. Well I'm not going to listen!" Fear was in his eyes, and he turned away, lest Andrew should see it. "I'm going in the house!"

Andrew stood watching as his elder brother walked away. He wondered if Gary would tell his mother and father. He doubted it. Gary wouldn't admit his fear even to Andrew, much less their parents. Andrew wondered if he should say something himself, but what could he say that wouldn't frighten his mother and enrage his father? Nothing. The only thing he could do was to forget all about the matter.

When Andrew was eleven, his bedroom changed. New carpet and curtains and wallpaper in mute pastel shades were exchanged for the bright, boisterous colors of childhood. Books and records replaced the toys. The electric train was long gone, broken and discarded, but the wardrobe was still there . . . unchanged.

The wardrobe now filled Andrew with terror whenever he was alone in his room. He began putting a chair in front of the doors each night, to make certain they could never come open while he was asleep. Gary never mentioned the nightmare again, not even to ridicule Andrew with it. In fact, it seemed to Andrew that all the family made a special point of not mentioning the wardrobe in any way at all.

He picked a moment when his father was alone. Gary was out with

his friends and his mother in town doing some shopping. He went into the lounge where his father sat in an armchair reading the newspaper.

Peter looked up as Andrew came in, saw by the look on his son's face that he wanted to ask something, and put his newspaper on the floor after carefully folding it in half.

"Dad, I wanted to ask you if I could have a desk in my room, so I'll have somewhere quiet to sit and do my homework."

"A desk? Well, I don't know. Your room's not very big to start with. Where are you going to put a desk?"

"It could go by the wall, between the door and the window."

Peter considered this for a moment, mentally measuring the length of the wall. "But what about the old wardrobe? It just about fills the space along that wall."

"We could have it taken out and put a proper fitted wardrobe in the alcove. That's what Darren Slater's got. He's got a desk and his room's a bit smaller than mine."

"Oh! I see it now," Andrew's father laughed. "But a desk would be useful, especially as you get older and have to do a lot more serious studying. I'll see what I can do about it. And with a bit of luck, you'll get a desk like Darren's or maybe better."

"Thanks, Dad!" said Andrew as he turned and all but swaggered out of the room.

Three days later, Peter went up to his youngest son's room. He found Andrew sitting on the bed, half-heartedly reading through his notes on the French Revolution for a coming exam.

Peter walked over to the wardrobe and stood with one hand resting on the polished wood. Andrew lifted his eyes from his book and nodded.

"There's a young bloke at the factory who's just got married and moved into a house in Waverley Road."

Andrew nodded.

"Well he's a bit short of money at the moment, not surprisingly, and he's looking around for furniture on the cheap. So I told him we'd got an old wardrobe he could have, if he collected it himself."

"What did he say, Dad?" Andrew asked, pushing his book under the bed.

"Oh. He said he'd have it. Said he'd be round Sunday afternoon with a mate of his who's got a Transit van."

Andrew swung round until he could see the wardrobe properly. At last it was going. But still he had to suppress a shudder.

The next day was Friday, and that afternoon when school was over,

Andrew and his mother took all the clothes out of the wardrobe and hung them in the white fitted wardrobe in his parents' room.

"It's a bit of a squeeze," said his mother, as she pushed her husband's gray three-piece suit along the rail in order to slide Andrew's duffle coat into the narrow space. "But we'll manage until we get you a new one."

After tea, Andrew and his father spent an hour wrestling the heavy wardrobe from its place against the wall and downstairs. The staircase was narrow and curved back on itself, so there was a lot of pushing and pulling and shouted instructions before they got the wardrobe out into the back garden.

Andrew's father brushed his hair out of his eyes with a dusty hand. "We could have done with Gary to give us a hand. This bloody thing's heavy enough to give me a hernia!"

Andrew rubbed his hands down the front of his jeans; there were two red lines across his palms where the edge of the wardrobe had dug into the soft flesh. But again they each took one end of the wardrobe. Like some ungainly giant crab they made their way into the shed with short, wobbly steps.

"That should do it," gasped Andrew, blowing air through his teeth with a soft whistling sound.

"Yep. You're right," his father said, as he tucked his shirt into his trousers. "It'll be okay in here, ready for Harry when he comes to collect it. Nice and close to the gate. I expect it'd rain if we left it outside. Come on then, let's go and see if your mother's got any orange juice in the fridge."

Andrew didn't follow him back indoors immediately. He lingered in the shed, studying the wardrobe. Suddenly, it seemed as dark and evil to him as when he had been a little boy. It was almost as if it were a living thing. Now that it was in the shed it was like a dangerous animal in a cage, trapped, but not nearly as deadly. He had the urge to taunt it.

"So you're going at last. After all these years of turning round with a gasp when I thought some hideous creature was going to leap out from inside you. I won't wake up in the middle of the night and see you looming there like the Gates of Hell!"

He raised his fist in a gesture of triumph . . . and the wardrobe gave a squealing creak, almost as if it were giving voice to its impotent fury.

Andrew's courage deserted him then. He ran out of the shed, slamming the door behind him and shot the bolt. He rushed indoors, his heart thundering madly against his ribs.

That night he experienced his nightmare again; the same nightmare

that had chilled his soul countless times before. But this time it was much worse. This time there were faces on the sides of the wardrobe, born from the patterning of the wood. They were demon faces, tattered and ragged, as if they had been sculpted in the wood but had run before drying, like candle wax. When Gary fell inside and the doors closed, awful crunching sounds could be heard, along with Gary's screams. They rose to a squealing howl which made Andrew's stomach and bladder convulse.

From the demon mouths blood began to pour, running down the sides of the wardrobe.

Andrew awoke, almost mad with fear. He scrambled out of bed making a low moaning noise. After long agonizing seconds of fumbling, his fingers found the light switch. He stood in the harsh brightness feeling ill. He felt a cold dampness and found that he had wet himself in his terror.

Andrew was sick as soon as he reached the bathroom. He made certain some of the vomit went down the front of his pajamas, hiding the stain of urine. His mother came running out of her bedroom and fussed over him.

"There, there, my poppet. Feeling better now?"

Andrew nodded, his face pale and sweat-streaked.

She wiped his face with a wet flannel and gave him a glass of water to drink. Andrew held the glass in his trembling hands, and the rim clinked against his teeth.

After he had changed, Andrew went back to his room and got into bed, but only after his mother had agreed to stay with him. She sat on a chair beside his bed and held his hand. A few minutes later his father came in. He stifled a yawn.

"Two o'clock in the morning, you pick the best time to be sick," he said, tying the belt of a faded red dressing gown around his waist. "What have you been up to?"

Andrew's fear made him reckless. He began telling his parents about his nightmare. When he had finished, his father stared at him with an angry look on his face.

"Don't you think it's about bloody time you forgot about that thing? You're not a little kid anymore! I swear to God, you must be barmy."

"Peter!" cried Madeleine, shocked by her husband's harsh words. "You're not helping him by shouting at him like this."

Peter said nothing, but stalked out of the room, slamming the door behind him. Madeleine put her hand on Andrew's brow and said gently, "You mustn't worry about what your father says. He doesn't really mean

it, you know. He's just worried about you, because he loves you. Everything will be better when that wretched wardrobe's taken away."

Andrew nodded, and buried his head in the pillow. He felt wretched.

The next morning Andrew got up early, glad to be out of the confines of his bedroom. Though the wardrobe was no longer there its presence seemed stronger. He gingerly stepped round the dark patch of carpet with the dirty line around it, the spot where the wardrobe had stood.

He went into the lounge and switched on the television. It was the Banana Splits Show, a repeat, but he didn't mind.

From the other room he could hear the sound of his mother and Gary talking. He couldn't quite catch what they said, but he somehow felt they were discussing him.

Gary came in and sat down on the arm of the settee. He began to twist himself from side to side, causing the settee to lift off the ground.

"Hey! Stop that, I'll tell Dad!" Andrew snapped indignantly as he lurched forward.

"Dad's not here. He's gone fishing. He couldn't bear to be in the same house as his barmy kid."

Andrew said nothing.

"I heard everything last night. You still believe all that rubbish about the wardrobe, don't you? I remember when you tried to scare me with your stupid story. 'Oooh! Gary, there's something in the wardrobe, Gary! It must be the bogeyman, Gary! I'm scared, Gary!'" he pitched his voice high and childlike.

Andrew still didn't answer, but he began to turn red with embarrassment.

Sensing his brother's discomfort, Gary went on, "I bet you were so scared you wet yourself!"

"Course I didn't! And anyway, I was only scared of it when I was a little kid. It'll be gone for good soon." He couldn't disguise the sense of relief he felt. Gary saw the fear he was trying to hide and said, "Come on outside, baby brother, and I'll show you there's no monster in the wardrobe waiting to get you. That's if you're not too frightened."

He left the challenge hanging in mid-air like a noose.

"Let's not bother, Gaz. I'm watching the telly." Andrew tried to turn his brother's thoughts to something else, but Gary was determined to extract the fullest enjoyment from his brother's phobia.

"You're scared! Chicken! You're shit-scared!" He began slapping the back of Andrew's head in time to his chanting.

Andrew lost his temper. He swung a fist at his brother, but Gary easily

blocked the wild swing and pulled Andrew onto the floor. He held him down with his knees on Andrew's shoulders.

"I'm telling you, you haven't got the bottle to go out there!" He slammed Andrew's head against the floor.

"Yes I have!" screamed Andrew, almost crying.

"Okay then, let's go!" Gary let go of his younger brother. Andrew stood up, rubbing the back of his head. Reluctantly, he followed Gary out into the back garden.

They halted in front of the shed, but only for a moment. Gary slid the bolt back, opened the door and stepped inside. Andrew stood outside peering in. Gary strode up to the wardrobe and pulled open the doors.

It seemed to Andrew that the interior was filled with smokey darkness. He couldn't see the back of the wardrobe.

"See, I told you there was nothing to be frightened of. It's empty," Gary called. Then he stepped inside.

Andrew was certain that Gary did nothing more than pull the door easily, yet it slammed shut with a bang that made his heart leap.

"Hey, Andy, open the door!" Gary's voice was muffled and strangely distant. "Come on. It's dark in here. I feel like I'm gonna suffocate."

"I never touched it, Gaz! I never touched it!" Andrew rushed in and tugged at the door handles as hard as he could. They refused to move. "Please come out, Gaz. I'm scared."

Slowly, so slowly, faces began to appear in the gleaming carvings of the wardrobe. They seemed to stare at Andrew, malevolent and hideous, tattered horrors from the darkest corners of his mind.

Andrew screamed as horrible scrabbling sounds came from inside. Gary's cry rose to a high-pitched howl.

Again Andrew tried to open the doors, but they were jammed impossibly tight. All the while the faces grinned at him, mocking his efforts.

Almost out of his mind with terror, Andrew looked wildly around the shed for something to open the doors with. His eyes briefly touched on the wooden mallet, the cold chisels with their red plastic handles, a claw hammer with one claw broken off. All seemed small and ineffectual.

Then he saw the axe propped up in one corner. He picked it up, heaved it onto his shoulder, and brought it down on the side of the wardrobe with all of his strength.

He smashed it again and again. The strength of madness pushed his young body to its limits. Wood splintered and cracked. From the mouths of the demon faces, blood poured, puddling on the floor.

"Andrew!"

His mother's scream from the doorway behind him brought him back to reality.

The doors of the wardrobe swung slowly open, and Gary's body fell out. It was gashed and covered in blood. His face was all but unrecognizable.

The faces laughed gleefully.

"God in Heaven!" screamed his mother, "What have you done?" She rushed to Gary's side, lifted his head and cradled it in her arms.

Andrew looked down at her, his face a mixture of horror and bewilderment. The axe fell from his nerveless fingers and thudded on the floor.

What was the matter with her? Couldn't she see the faces? The demon faces laughing and howling as the bright red blood ran from their mouths?

Couldn't she see the faces?

Angst for the Memories

Vincent McHardy

Canadian writer Vincent McHardy was born April 26, 1955 and currently resides in Agincourt, Ontario. Following a three-year term in anthropology at York University, McHardy eventually decided to try his hand at writing. His interest in fantasy and horror arose through his voracious reading appetite, which led him to devour everything from Doc Savage to Ray Bradbury. In the last few years, McHardy has written a great many short stories. Initially these were published in amateur or semiprofessional magazines—Quarry, Reader's Choice, Moonscape, The Horror Show, Etchings & Odysseys, and others. In the past year he has sold to Twilight Zone Magazine, Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine, as well as to several anthologies. The following story is from R. L. Leming's small press anthology, Daminations; McHardy has a story also in the forthcoming follow-up More Daminations. His story, "Keepsake," was reprinted in The Year's Best Horror Stories: Series XII.

Vincent McHardy is looking for a publisher interested in a collection of his short fiction, while he works away at his first novel, And Cancer For All. Ought to be some takers.

"THOUGHT.

"It's so far away.

"I can't see. I can't feel. I can't live this way.

"Let me go.

"If I could touch something, or have a hand to touch something with, I could prove I exist. But there is nothing to point to. No sound. No heat. No pressure. No light. Nothing.

"Am I talking, or am I thinking? I don't feel lips moving. Where are those tender vibrations that would tell me I have a skull?

"Let me go.

"Whoever, whatever holds me here, let me go. Or tell me where I am. I could live knowing what happened. How I got here. Where this, here, is. I could live with that, and lie down and die.

"Ha! Lie down. I could be lying down now, or floating, or falling, or standing quite still. I can't tell. There are no boundaries in this world. I rush to the infinite. I contract to the infinitesimal.

"Let me go.

"End it.

. . . .

" . . . Here."

"What!"

"I'm here. Don't go."

"I won't go. I won't go. Where are you?"

"Nowhere. There was nothing to hold my mind until I found you."

"Then you're not the one holding me here?"

"No. I'm here with you."

"Then, who are you?"

"I'm not sure."

"You're part of my madness."

"I am not. I found you. I pulled you to me."

"Then tell me your name."

"It's been so long since I asked myself that question."

"Your name. Tell me!"

"I remember, Lloyd . . . Lloyd Pryce. Yes, Lloyd Pryce. A beautiful name. A glorious title for existing. Don't you think?"

"Yes."

"Lloyd. Lloyd. Lloyd. Oh, how I hated my name as a child. A child. I was a child. I grew up. Became a forest manager. Yes. Yes. I married Jennifer Cleary. We have four children. I . . . I want to go back. Oh Lord, please take me back. Don't leave"

"Shut up! Don't crawl. They want us to crawl."

"They?"

"Yes, they. Do you think this is natural? Someone has done this to us. Put us here. Blocked our senses. Disoriented us."

"It's possible."

"It's true, Lloyd. You broke their plans. You reached me."

"I had to. I'd reached bottom. I had to find somebody. Somebody? Who are you?"

"Well, I'm . . ."

"Come on. It shouldn't be difficult."

"Just a minute, will you . . . ?"

"Does it start with an A?"

"Please, let me think."

"Stop."

"Why not start with all the alphabet. It doesn't matter. Does it? Not to a . . ."

"ALEXANDER J. SCULLY! Druggist for thirty-five years, at Kirbie's Pharmacy. Divorced. No children. Graduated Danner University, with honors. And, to the best of my recollection, I had a very happy childhood."

"I'm sorry, Al. I thought you might be . . ."

"Might be what I thought you were?"

"Yes."

"We might be, Lloyd. Names don't prove we exist."

"They help. Before we named ourselves, we drifted. Names give us something to hold on to. Names will pull us out of here."

"How did you know I was out here? I sensed nothing."

"I *didn't* know you were out there. I drifted. How long I can't tell. Then something twitched. I felt there must be *something* out there. The darkness changed. I felt a thickness and thought, 'There it is.' And then you came."

"Nothing more than thought?"

"That's all it took, Al."

"Then we must remember. Develop links to our past. Our past will save us."

"Yes, that's it, Al. Try and remember your last day in the real world. I remember mine. I was on vacation, camping, up at Lake-of-the-Woods. We have a cabin up there. Jenny and the kids were up with me. I wanted to hike over to Gem Lake. You can only get there by foot. I went alone. It's a five-hour walk, too long for the children. I camped overnight. Ten hours of walking left little time for exploring. Nothing unusual happened. I reached the lake, explored, caught dinner and pitched a tent under a fine Norwegian pine. I read by the light of a Coleman till about one. After I turned out the light, I heard the sound of thunder. I remember thinking, oh, it's going to be a fine storm. The way summer storms are. I tried to stay awake, but the pounding tapped on and on. The storm was far away. It crept closer. I fell asleep listening. Now, I'm here."

"Nowhere."

"I wish I'd stayed awake."

"Listen, Lloyd. Listen to my last day outside."

"I'm all ears."

"I opened the pharmacy at seven-thirty, like always. The clerks were waiting for me. The papers came at seven-thirty-eight, our first customer at eight-o-six. The morning was slow. I ate the lunch I brought. The afternoon could have been the morning. At six-fifteen I went to the

Golden Wheel Restaurant next door and had supper. I came back and waited until ten before closing up. I live just across the street, so I was home in time to catch the early news. I filled my pipe, my only vice, and sat to watch. Bombings, revolutions and cold war politics. I'd seen it all before, like the world had and will again. The news didn't tell me anything new, so I drifted off, and beached up here."

"Al, we're dead."

"The hell we are!"

"It fits. You with your pipe, me in a lightning storm, we both could have fried in the night."

"Could, could, could. That's not proof. That's not even probable. I've been smoking a pipe for over thirty years, and I've learned that it's damned hard to keep lit. It's not like a cigarette. You've got to puff it, coddle it, make sure your spittle doesn't drown it. You concentrate to keep it going. Lloyd, that pipe was cold by the time I fell asleep.

"Now, what about that lightning? The tree you were sleeping under, it wasn't the only tree around?"

"I was in a forest."

"The tree wasn't the tallest tree in the forest?"

"No, it wasn't."

"So the danger was slight. Chances are, you didn't burn from lightning."

"But there is always a chance. When you hear that one in ten thousand will die in a car crash, you think, well, it won't be me. Those are just statistics. People are statistics! Some bodies *must* die to make those numbers add up. So why not you and me? Eh, Al? Who's to say we can't crap out on a dice roll? You fall asleep with a pipe that can't be lit with a blow torch, but tonight is special, one small ember holds on. No reason. Just one-in-a-million. Poof! Inside of ten minutes, you're indistinguishable from your pipe ash. And me. Lucky Lloyd, with a trillion-billion-to-one, triple-lightning-bolt bank shot, off the water, off the rock, off the tree to off me. I'm probably sitting out there, grinning, with my zipper electroplated."

"Stop it, Lloyd. You didn't struggle to reach me just to prove you're dead."

"Why not? I don't know why I thought there was something out there in the dark. I just thought. The thought might be a joke, to give us hope there is a way out of here. Al? If we're not dead, then what are we?"

"We are lost. We are confused. *But we exist*. We have our minds. If we have a mind, we have a brain. I've been a chemist all my life, and I've

yet to see an exception to the rule, function following form. Our minds must have a form to exist."

"But where are we?"

"I think we are in a tank."

"Tank?"

"A desensitization tank. No light. No sound. No sensation of up or down. Just floating."

"No. It doesn't make sense. If we were in a tank, I'd be able to splash. I'd hear that. Or I'd be able to punch myself. I'd feel that."

"True. If we were in a tank alone. But if we are drugged, or restrained, those methods are not possible. If this is true, we are living through our skins. The difference between the inner and outer world is a delicate one. Remove the barrier, disrupt it, and you unleash monsters."

"If our senses are blocked, how are we talking?"

"Well, we're not speaking. They wouldn't have overlooked our hearing. I'm willing to believe it's telepathy. Cut off from our bodies, by the tank and drugs, our minds are active. You close one door and you've opened another. They've awakened us to telepathy."

"They. You're always talking about them. You sound paranoid."

"This place is paranoid. It is constructed to drive us mad. I'm looking for a reason to save us. There must be a reason why we are here. I can't give you a name, but I can give you a reason. Somebody wants us to lose our memories."

"*Tabula Rasa.*"

"Yes, that's it."

"But why?"

"I've seen it coming on the vid-news. Last year's Southern Hemisphere Alliance, the bombing of OPEC ministers in Geneva, the destruction of Mexico City by the plague, I could go on. The world is at war, an undeclared war that's claimed us as victims."

"But we're unimportant. Nobody would want us."

"Lloyd, in a war, anyone behind enemy lines is important. Someone, some power, wants our names, our pasts, but not us."

"It's possible."

"It's true!"

"No truer than my theory."

"How can you say that? I've used reason to show . . ."

"To show we disagree. We won't get out this way."

"You're right. We must work together."

"It's the only way."

....

"Al, don't be spiteful about Nancy."

"Nancy?"

"Curious. At a time of crisis you think of your ex-wife. You haven't forgiven her for the divorce. Do you *really* believe if she stayed with you, you wouldn't be here?"

"How'd you know?"

"Reason, Al. You said it. You used it as a club against me. I reasoned that, if we're linked telepathically, I didn't have to wait until you sent me a thought. I could take what was there."

"Get out of my mind!"

"Don't be afraid Al. It works both ways. If we're ever to get out of here, it must work both ways. We can only grow stronger. Try . . ."

"Chalk. You're smelling chalk from the blackboard eraser. You're cleaning them after school."

"I wasn't thinking of that."

"Somewhere you were. Under the layers. I found it. You're right. It works."

"We are right."

. . . .

"Lloyd, I feel something."

"I know. You feel the others. Ever since I found you I've felt them. Now that we're linked you feel them."

"Have you spoken to them?"

"No. I sense them. It's like trying to remember something you've known all your life. You strain to remember. You feel a resistance. You back away. Calm down, and there it is. You remember."

"I don't know if I can calm down, Lloyd. I've been on the edge too long."

"You can do it, Al. We work together now. We can break through if we cooperate."

"I'll try."

"Think back to when you were happy. When nothing was wrong and you thought you would live forever."

"I've never had a time like that."

"Yes you did. Time held its breath and you breathed deeply."

"Never!"

"You're twelve years old and it's summer vacation. You're in a canoe"

" . . . It's three in the morning and I have the lake to myself."

"That's it."

"The air is still. The water is dark, deadly still. I'm the only human

moving at three in the morning. There are no stars. The sky is overcast. I can see the forest edging the lake because the sky lights up with distant lightning. A storm is coming. I turn on my flashlight and hold it between my knees. A mist sits on the water. I paddle out deeper. Tiny whirlpools suckle down to the mud below. Water dribbles off the blade as I reach for another pull. I bang the canoe with the handle as I stroke through. The sky grumbles"

"What! Why did you wake me? Is it news from the front?"

"I . . ."

"Speak up man! I have little time for sleep and no time for needless interruptions. What are the Russians doing?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'll have your head on a spike! Guards! Remove that man!"

"What?"

"He's quite mad, Al."

"What's going on, Lloyd?"

"We broke through. Your sense memory pulled us through the barrier to him. He thinks he's Napoleon, but he's Arthur Friske. A used car salesman, playing out his dreams of power."

"I've always wanted to know what lurked beneath a used car salesman's smile. It's not pleasant."

"Not at all, Al. That's why I'm controlling him."

"Yes. I can't hear him."

"We don't need to hear him. It would take more energy than we can afford to unravel his madness. We could get lost down there."

"Yes, Lloyd. We can't waste time explaining. We must get out."

"We can, and will get out. Do you feel how?"

"I feel something."

"Power, Al. It's power. Since we took over that pathetic Arthur Friske, we've grown. We resonate."

"Lloyd? Something is moving. I feel it around us. Swimming, lurking, waiting for us."

"The others. There are many others out there, Al. Hundreds. We must agree that we can't stop to listen. Not if we want to get out."

"Agreed. The others will all have stories and needs. They might contest us."

"If we give them a chance."

"We won't. We need their life power."

"Power to reach the edge. Power to escape."

"The others can come, but they must follow."

"Al—Lloyd will not stop."

. . . .

"Thank you. I knew someone would come. I knew I wouldn't be left here alone. I . . ."

"Must we cut her?"

"We must. Feel the power?"

"Feel the awakening?"

"More come. Listen to them. They splat on us like bugs on a wind-screen. Lucy Spicer. Aloysia Rutter. Lawrence Ellam. Gertrude Diack. William Rumelfanger. Come in."

"So fast. We can't count you all. So fast. We want to scream."

. . . .

"The barrier."

"The barrier!"

"It is complete. It is sealed."

"It is hard. It is cold. It cannot be torn."

"This is not the end. The hundreds cry."

"It is time to wait."

. . . .

"Light!"

"A band of light!"

"The barrier is breaking open."

"Move now. Move out to the light!"

The truck/vat had sat in the back room of the abortion clinic, forgotten. The five-hundred-plus fetuses originally left inside, equally forgotten.

But times and contents change.

As seen when someone curiously opened the lid . . . and something, very much like a hand, reached out

The Thing in the Bedroom

David Langford

David Langford has long held the name-most-often-on-a-hit-list distinction in science fiction circles as the fearless editor of the magazine, Ansible. Born in 1953 in South Wales, Langford earned an honors degree in physics at Brasenose College, Oxford and worked as a physicist at Atomic Weapons Research Establishment, Aldermaston until 1980. Since then he has been a freelance author, whose books on various subjects include War in 2080: The Future of Military Technology, Facts & Fallacies: A Book of Definitive Mistakes & Misguided Predictions (with Chris Morgan), The Necronomicon (with George Hay, Robert Turner, and Colin Wilson), The Space Eater (a novel), The Leaky Establishment (a satire), and the forthcoming The Third Millennium: A History of the World 2000-3000 AD (with Brian Stableford).

Robert Bloch has commented that horror and humor are flip sides of the same coin. While Langford's last appearance in The Year's Best Horror Stories ("3.47 AM" in Series XII) was unrelentingly grim, with "The Thing in the Bedroom" he takes an irreverent poke at one of this genre's hallowed traditions, the occult investigator. David Langford currently lives with his wife, Hazel, "in a vast crumbling house in Reading, with 7000 books and slightly fewer woodworm."

THE CIRCLE of initiates about the roaring fire in the King's Head bar was sadly diminished of late, entertaining though the conversation had always been. For one thing, the roaring fire had been superseded by a mournfully bonging radiator; even the popular Mr. Jorkens had ceased to come when the landlord installed his third Space Invaders machine. On this particular evening there was little sparkle in the conversation, and far too much in the foaming keg beer; only Major Godalming, Carruthers and old Hyphen-Jones were present, and, passing by an easy transition from gassy beer to chemical warfare and military reminiscences in general, the Major was well into his much-thumbed anecdotes of the earlobe he lost to Rommel, the dueling scar acquired while in

Heidelberg on a package tour, and the ugly *kukri* wound he'd received in Bradford. Carruthers and Hyphen-Jones yawned their appreciation and choked down their beer; half-formed excuses about not keeping the wife up too late seemed to be trembling in the air like ectoplasm, when a shadow fell across the table.

"My round, chaps!"

The speaker was tall, handsome, rugged; from his built-up shoes to his shoulder bag he was every inch an English gentleman.

"Smythe, my dear fellow!" the Major cried. "We'd given you up for dead!"

"And well you might," said Smythe. "It happened to me once, did death—you may remember my telling you about that hideous affair of the haunted percolator? For a short while, then, I was clinically dead. It was nothing. There are things worse than death, worse by far . . ."

"Murrage's keg beer, for example?" suggested Carruthers.

The subtlety of this hint was not lost on Smythe, who took the empty glasses to the bar and in a mere twenty minutes returned with three beers and a stiff gin-and-tonic for himself.

"Cheers," said the Major. "Now where *have* you been these last three months? Living abroad with some woman, I suppose, as you did for half a year after laying the ghost in that 'Astral Buffalo' case? Ah, you randy devil—"

"Not so," Smythe said with a laugh. "For one reason and another I've merely been visiting a different class of pub, a different sort of bar, as shortly you will understand . . ."

"Well, dammit man, what was this case?" the Major boomed. "What was so much more terrible than death? You've changed, you know. The experience has set its mark upon you . . . by God! Your hair! I've only just noticed it's gone white!"

"Just a little bleach, my dear Major—I fancied myself as a blond. But let me tell you of the case which must rank as one of the most baffling and sinister of my career—an appalling case of what I can only call *occult possession*."

"We had that last year," said Carruthers, scratching his head. "That business of the giant bat of Sumatra: or was it the giant cat? One frightful influence from beyond the world we know is very like another, I find."

Smythe settled himself more comfortably on his favorite stool, smiled, and opened a packet of potato chips in the characteristic manner which told his friends that another fascinating narration was on its way, and that they were to buy drinks for the raconteur all the rest of that evening.

"As you know, I've gained some small reputation in the matters of

detection, the occult and the odd tricks of the mind—" Here Smythe distributed the customary business cards and mentioned the 10 percent discount he offered to friends—"And so it was that Mrs. Pring brought her terrible problem to me, and on the recommendation of a bosom friend who'd heard of my ad in the *Sunday Times* color supplement. Mrs. Pring—"

"Ah, an incurable old womanizer," wheezed Hyphen-Jones. "Did Mr. Pring find you out?"

Smythe gave him an austere glance, and coldly ate another chip. "Mrs. Pring is a widow of forty-six, whose home is in the moderately appalling seaside resort of Dash. She lets out one room of her house under the usual bed-and-breakfast terms. Personally I think the enterprise would be more successful if she did not apparently stuff the mattress with breakfast cereal and serve its former contents in a bowl each morning, but this is to anticipate. The story Mrs. Pring told to me three months ago was, like so many of the tales told in my office, strange, terrible and unique. Over the years, you see, my client had noticed a curious statistical trend as regards the people who stayed with her. She keeps a very detailed set of books, two in fact, and there was no possibility that her memory could be deceiving her. In brief: many gentlemen (to use her term) had undergone bed and breakfast at Mrs. Pring's and for some reason which I find inexplicable had returned in subsequent years. Some women did the same: the odd point which caught Mrs. Pring's attention was that young or even relatively young women tended not to return. In fact they tended to leave abruptly, with various noises of embarrassment and outrage, after no more than one night in the room. That Mrs. Pring took several years to notice the phenomenon is perhaps best explained by her delicate state of health, which is only sustained by almost daily trips to buy medicinal liquids not sold by chemists. That Mrs. Pring was properly alarmed by her discovery is shown by the fact that for a whole year she actually provided butter rather than margarine with the breakfast toast: it made no difference. What d'you make of that?"

"I suppose," said Carruthers slowly, "that some terrible tragedy had been enacted in that fatal room?"

Smythe looked startled, and dropped a chip. "Well—yes, actually. However did you guess?"

"My dear fellow, I've been listening to your curious and unique tales for upwards of eight years."

"Well, never mind that. Mrs. Pring evolved a theory that that all too unyielding mattress was infested, not with elementals as in that fearsome Wriggling Eiderdown case but with what in her rustic way she chose to

call incests. As she put it, 'What I thought was, those bleeding things might be partial to young ladies what has nice soft skin . . . anyway, I reckoned I'd better have a kip-down there meself and see if anything comes crawling-like, bedbuggers or flippin' fleas or whatever—' With uncommon fortitude, Mrs. Pring did indeed pass a night in this spare room of hers. Her account of it is very confused indeed, but she remarked several times that something had indeed come a-crawling . . . but as to its nature and actions, she continually lapsed into a state of incoherence and embarrassment. The same embarrassment, you may note, with which her lady lodgers would so hurriedly leave."

The Major said: "And the next morning, I suppose, she came straight to you and asked for something to be done about it?"

Smythe studied each of his friends in turn, until Hyphen-Jones misinterpreted the dramatic pause and scurried to buy more drinks. "In point of fact," Smythe said quietly, "she first attempted to investigate the phenomenon more closely by sleeping in that room every night for the following six months. It seems that no other manifestation took place during all that time, as she informed me with some suppressed emotion; after a while she dismissed the experience as hallucination and thought little more of it until the first week of the new holiday season—when no less than three young women stayed a night and left without eating the margarine they'd paid for. One of them murmured something incoherent to Mrs. Pring about a ghost that needed to be laid. It was then that Mrs. Pring decided something must be done: and after checking that my fee was tax-deductible, she placed the matter in my hands."

"Why d'you suppose the Pring female only saw whatever-it-was the one time?" inquired Carruthers.

"My theory has to take into account the fact that this was a chauvinist haunting, as you might put it, with a preference for young ladies, quite contrary to the Sex Discrimination Act. The inference would seem to be that Mrs. Pring, who is a lady of what is called a certain age, very rapidly lost her attraction for—let's call it the manifestation. Picture her as a glass of that repellent keg beer: one sip was quite enough for any person of taste."

"I'm beginning to get a vague but quite monstrous notion of what you're leading up to . . ." the Major observed slowly.

"It's worse than you think," Smythe assured him. "I know I shall never be the same again after the night I spent in that room."

"But—" said Hyphen-Jones querulously, before Smythe silenced him with a single charismatic gesture which tipped half a pint of beer into his lap.

"An exorcism seemed to be in order," said Smythe, "but first I had to know what I was up against. You recall that ghastly business of the Squeaking Room in Frewin Hall—the exorcism had no effect whatever upon those mice. When closely questioned, Mrs. Pring retreated into blushes and giggles: I saw I'd have to keep a vigil there myself, and see what astral impressions my finely trained nervous system might not glean from the surroundings. Thus I traveled first-class to Dash, and Mrs. Pring accompanied me back in (I'm glad to relate) a second-class carriage. The resort was as depressing as I'd foreseen, rather like an extensive penal colony by the sea; Mrs. Pring's house corresponded roughly to the maximum security block. Anyway, I steeled myself against the appalling *Presence* which pervaded the place—chiefly a smell of boiled cabbage—and readied myself to pass a night within the haunted room. I assured Mrs. Pring that I never failed . . . have you ever known me tell the story of a case in which I failed?"

Hyphen-Jones looked up again. "What about that time when—ouch!" Some paranormal impulse had helped the rest of his beer to find its way into his lap.

"So I assured her, as I said, that I never failed—ah, little did I know—and that whatever dwelt in that room was as good as exorcized. I fancied, you know, that she looked regretful—as though admitting to herself that a favorite aunt who'd committed several chainsaw massacres should probably be locked up, but admitting it regretfully. So, one by one, I ascended the creaking stairs to that room of dread. The dying sun peered through its single window in a flood of grimy yet eldritch radiance. But there was nothing sinister about the place save the peeling wallpaper, whose green-and-purple pattern set me brooding for some reason on detached retinas. I waited there, as darkness fell, all lights extinguished to minimize the etheric interference . . ."

"And what happened, old boy?" cried Carruthers. "What happened to you?"

"Precisely what I'd expected: nothing at all. Whatever haunted that room was staying a male chauvinist pig to the very last. The only moment when a thrill went through me was when I heard a clock strike midnight far out across the town—the witching hour—the moment when my consultation rates switched from time-and-a-half to double time. Presently dawn came, and this being the seaside resort of Dash it wasn't even a proper rosy dawn: more like suet pudding rising in the east. An appalling place.

"Over breakfast, when not pitting my teeth against Mrs. Pring's famous vintage toast, I questioned her closely about the room's history. As you

know, we occult sleuths can deduce a great deal from the answers to innocuous-seeming questions; after some routine inquiries about whether, for example, she regularly celebrated the Black Mass in the room in question, I subtly asked her, 'Mrs. Pring, has some terrible tragedy been enacted in that fatal room?' She denied this loudly and angrily, saying, 'What kind of a house do you think I bleeding well keep here? I've had no complaints and no-one's ever snuffed it on *my* premises, not even Mr. Brosnan what had the food-poisoning, which he must have got from chips or summat brought in against me house rules . . . you'll not get no food-poisoning from *my* bacon-an-eggs, sir.'

"I was tolerably well convinced that I wouldn't, since after noting how many times Mrs. Pring dropped the bacon on the floor I had taken the precaution of secreting mine under the table-cloth (where I was interested to find several other rashers left by previous visitors). After a short silence during which she tested the temperature of the teapot with one finger and apparently found it satisfactory, Mrs. Pring added: 'Of course there was always poor Mr. Nicolls all those years ago.'

"We occult sleuths are trained to seize instantly on apparent trivia. Casually I threw out the remark, 'What about poor Mr. Nicolls?'

"Oh, 'e had a terrible accident, he did. Oh, it was awful, sir. What a lucky thing he wasn't married. What happened, you see, he caught himself in the door somehow, which I could understand, him being clumsy by nature and having such a— Well, lucky he wasn't married is what I always said, and of course 'e wouldn't get married after that. I heard tell he went into the civil service instead. —Oooh *sir*, you don't think—?"

"I do indeed think precisely that, Mrs. Pring,' I told her solemnly. We occult sleuths are, as you can imagine, sufficiently accustomed to such phenomena as disembodied hands or heads haunting some ill-favored spot, and I've even encountered one disembodied foot—you remember it, the 'Howling Bunion' case, which drove three Archbishops to the asylum. I conjectured now that the unfortunate Mr. Nicolls, though it seemed that most of him still lived, was a man of parts and haunted Mrs. Pring's room still. Upon hearing my theory, the landlady seemed less shocked and horrified than I would have expected. 'Fancy that,' she remarked with a look of peculiar vacancy, and added, 'I ought to 'ave recognized him, at that.' I did not press my questioning any further."

"What a frightful story," shivered Carruthers. "To think of that poor Mr. Nicolls, never able to know the pleasure of women again."

"In that," said Smythe in a strange voice, "I share his fate."

There was a tremulous pause. Smythe licked his lips, squared his

shoulders. "I must have a trickle," he remarked, and departed the room amid whispered comments and speculations as to whether or not there was something odd in the way he walked.

"My strategy," Smythe continued presently, "was to lure the manifestation into the open so it might be exorcized by the Ritual of the Astral League. You need damnably supple limbs for that ritual, but it has great power over elementals, manifestations and parking meters. But how to lure this ab-human entity into sight? Mrs. Pring no longer had charms for it, which was understandable, and I could hardly ask for some innocent young woman to expose herself to what I now suspected to lurk in that room.

"In the end I saw there was only one thing to be done. During the day I made certain far from usual purchases in the wholly God-forsaken town of Dash, and also paid a visit to a local hairdresser's. You remarked, did you not, my dear Major, that I'd gone ash-blond with fright? I cleared the furniture from that bedroom and made my preparations—having first instructed Mrs. Pring to remain downstairs and presented her with a bottle of her favorite medicine to ensure she did so. Now the water in that town, I suspected, was not pure: instead I consecrated a quantity of light ale and with it marked out my usual protective pentacle. This was a mark-IX Carnacki pentacle, guaranteed impervious to any materialized ectoplasmic phenomenon as specified in British Standard 3704.

"In the early evening I carried out the last stages of my plan, undressing and changing into the clothes I'd bought amid some small embarrassment. There was a rather exquisite form-fitting black dress with its skirt slashed almost to the hip; beneath this dress, by certain stratagems well known to us occult consultants, I contrived a magnificent bosom for myself. I need scarcely trouble you with the minor details of the sensual perfume guaranteed to send any male bar the unfortunate Mr. Nicolls into instant tachycardia, or the pastel lipstick which so beautifully complemented my eyes, or the sheer black stockings which I drew over my carefully shaven legs, or . . ."

"All right, all right," said the Major, gulping hastily at his beer. "I think we get the general idea."

"Be like that if you must. I waited there in the huge pentacle, in a room lit only by the flickering candles I'd acquired from the occult-supplies counter at the local Woolworth's. As I stood there I could see myself in the mirror screwed to one wall (presumably because Mrs. Pring felt her guests might well smuggle out any six-by-four-foot mirror that wasn't screwed down): I was magnificent, I tell you, a vision of—oh, very well, if you insist.

"I waited there with the tension mounting, waiting for whatever might (so to speak) come, and the candles gradually burnt down. The room filled with bodings of approaching abomination, as of a dentist's waiting room. Suddenly I realized there was a strange luminescence about me, a very pale fog of light that filled the air, as though Mrs. Pring were boiling vast quantities of luminous paint in the kitchen below. With fearful slowness the light coagulated, condensed, contracted toward a point in the air some eighteen inches from the floor; abruptly it took definite shape and I saw the throbbing, ectoplasmic form of the *thing* that had haunted this room for so long. It was larger than I'd expected, perhaps nine inches from end to end; it wavered this way and that in the air as though seeking something in a curious one-eyed manner; the thought occurred to me that it had formed atop the bed and centrally positioned itself, or at least would have done so had I not previously removed the bed. Even as this notion flared in my mind like a flashbulb, the Thing appeared to realize there was nothing to support it now: it flopped quite solidly and audibly to the floor."

"Audibly?" Hyphen-Jones quavered. "With a thud, or a clatter, or—?"

Smythe darted an impatient glance at him. "With the sound of a large frankfurter falling from a height of eighteen inches onto wooden floorboards, if you wish to be precise. The horror of it! These solid manifestations are the most terrible and inarguable of spiritual perils—it's infinitely easier to deal with an astral entity which *can't* respond with a sudden blow to your solar plexus. And worst of all, something which might have sent my hair white if I hadn't already dyed it this rather fetching color, the Thing had now fallen *inside* the pentacle, with me! Again, imagine the horror of it, the feeling of spiritual violation: already my outer defenses had been penetrated. The ab-human embodiment reared up, questing this way and that like a cobra readying its strike—and then it began to move my way. I utterly refuse to describe the manner in which it moved, but I believe there are caterpillars which do the same thing. If so, they have no shame. I knew that a frightful peril was coming for me—it's always horribly dangerous when something materializes inside your very defenses, though this wasn't perhaps as bad as in that Phantom Trumpeter case: you remember it, where the spectral elephant took solid form within my all too small pentacle? But in this particular situation I felt I was safe from the worse, at least."

"Why were you safe from the worst?" asked the fuddled Hyphen-Jones.

"A matter of anatomy," Smythe said evasively, and left Hyphen-Jones to work it out. "Still, I was too confident, as it happened. The only safe

course was to *get out of that room* and perhaps try to bag it with a long-range exorcism from the landing What I did was to experiment with a little of the consecrated ale left over from making the pentacle. I flicked some at the crawling Thing as it snaked its way toward me, and—well, it must have been peculiarly sensitive. It positively dribbled with rage, and vanished in a burst of ectoplasm.

"I believed the Thing must have withdrawn itself for the night, abandoning its rigid form and returning to the nameless Outer Spheres. Again, I'd fallen into the trap of over-confidence . . . I was still standing there in my fatally gorgeous ensemble when once again that luminous fog filled the air about me and—no, I can't bring myself to describe what happened then. Certain of the older grimoires recommend that practitioners of the magical arts, black or white, should ritually seal each of the nine orifices of the body as part of the preliminaries. I believe I now know why."

"My God, you don't mean—?" said Carruthers, but seemed to lack the vocabulary or inclination to take the sentence further. Hyphen-Jones appeared to be counting under his breath.

"Well, I'll be buggered," the Major murmured.

Tersely Smythe explained how, pausing only to waive his fee and advise that Mrs. Pring should sleep henceforth in the cursed room while renting out her own, he'd departed Dash without so much as changing his clothing.

"So my life was transformed by that Thing in the Bedroom," he concluded gaily. "Now let me tell you of my newest case, one which I was previously reluctant to investigate—the matter of the haunted chamber in the Café Royal, where the shade of Oscar Wilde is said to (at the very least) walk . . ."

Borderland

by John Brizzolara

John Brizzolara was born in Chicago on December 11, 1950. He grew up in that city, where he read avidly the works of authors ranging from Poe and Lovecraft to Conan Doyle and H. G. Wells to Franklin W. Dixon and Mickey Spillane. During the late sixties and early seventies he traveled and recorded with various rock bands—"now defunct and probably best forgotten." He and his wife, Diane, currently reside in San Diego, California, with their son, Geoffrey Byron. The couple have collaborated on several stories, and Brizzolara has had fiction published in Weird Tales, Whispers, Weirdbook, Isaac Asimov's, Twilight Zone Magazine, and Amazing. He has left the music business and now pays the bills by tending bar and working in bookstores.

Brizzolara explains that "Borderland" was the product of a night I spent last December driving up and down the San Diego/Tijuana border with a U.S. Border Patrol agent in a four-wheel-drive Ram Charger. I was doing research on a hard-boiled detective novel I've written called Wirecutter and it occurred to me that the setting was a fine one for the annual Christmas ghost story Diane and I write for each other to be read on Christmas Eve. (In the M. R. James tradition.)" Brizzolara's novel has been at one publisher for some months now, and if it's half as effective as "Borderland," they'd best be drawing up a contract.

"KIND OF SPOOKY," Sanchez said, just to be saying something. He realized immediately that it sounded wrong; it was a "new guy" kind of thing to say.

The moon was a tiny arc of cold light that illuminated nothing. The early November wind was a muffled shriek outside as it wound through the canyons and over the mesa. It sang with a reedy, plaintive voice as it passed the stand of eucalyptus trees known as the Dillon Treeline. Tumbleweeds flew through the air and launched themselves against the darkened Border Patrol Ram Charger, striking the windshield and the side panels of the van with the sound of fingernails seeking entry.

It was 11:53 p.m. on a Saturday night.

"You'll get used to it." Hagen kept turning left and then right in the passenger seat, peering into the blackness at hurtling shadows. "God-damn tumbleweeds. I keep thinking we got something out there, and it's just tumbleweeds every time." Hagen was a heavyset man in his early forties with sideburns that were a little too long for his crew cut hair. He looked like a man who has spent most of his life in some kind of authority over others, but Sanchez had noticed an extraordinary gentleness about him.

"It's corny, Dead Man's Canyon." Sanchez put on his gloves and raised the collar on his jacket, watching his breath condense against the starlight. He couldn't so much as light a cigarette without giving away their position. If there was anyone out there to give it away to, that is. "They really call it that, huh?"

"Yep. The Mexicans call it pretty much the same thing. I guess we got the name from them. I don't really know."

"Sounds like kid stuff. *The Hardy Boys and the Secret of Dead Man's Canyon*. Something like that."

"Yeah." Hagen pointed with his chin at the umbra of shadow, like a huge wound, in the mesa ahead of them. "You can't see the bottom of that thing from anywhere around. Not unless you get right up to it. There's a good mile and a half of it, too, between the border and Spring Canyon." He spat tobacco out the window. "You got bandit activity, rape, a body? I'd say a good seven, eight times outta ten it's in Dead Man's."

Sanchez was still unused to the casualness with which the other agents dealt with the atmosphere of violence and desperation in their job. It was his second week on the patrol along the San Diego/Tijuana border and already he had had rocks thrown at him, been kicked in the crotch, and retrieved the body of a drowned boy from the Tijuana River levy. Now for the first time he was patrolling the Browns Field sector along the Otay Mesa to the east; what the illegals called *El Cerro* and the agents called the Eastern Front. It was here that the bandits who preyed on the groups of fence-cutters, or *alambristas*, found business to be the most profitable. Mostly inaccessible, even with four-wheel-drive vehicles, the canyons provided a perfect ambush gallery for their victims and an impossible obstacle course for *La Migra*, the Border Patrol.

In the past three weeks there had been a rise in incidents along the Eastern Front. One narcotic overdose: the body had been tossed over a fence to the U.S. side from a hotel window. Another boy, shot to death, had been discovered near the microwave dish in the E3 sector—no one knew why, nor would they ever know. And there had been three rapes,

one of which was stopped in progress by Border agents; the other two were now statistics in an open file in the prosecution office. As always, people were victimized in one way or another, often by the "coyotes" or the guides themselves, then left to wander the mesa to be arrested by the Patrol. These would be returned to Mexico the next day, destitute and without prospects, but alive. They were the lucky ones. Many found their way into unmarked graves. There was no way of ever really knowing how many.

Hagen, still pivoting his head from side to side and shifting his position to see into the near-total blackness outside the van, picked up the radio microphone from the dashboard. "Ten-twenty-eight here. This is 1028 in sector E4 west of the Dillon Treeline. Anybody got a scope shootin' this way? It's blacker'n a banker's heart out here and we can't tell the bad guys from the tumbleweed without a program. Over."

"Ten-twenty-eight, this is 901. That you, Hagen? Over."

"Yeah, me and Sanchez. You got a scope, Gary? Over."

"I got the green eye on ya. You boys are all alone. You and the rabbits. Can't see down into Dead Man's, but Moody's Canyon is clear and Behan and Velsor are pickin' up some good ones in Spring. Over."

The green eyes were the infrared nightscopes that showed up body heat as a pale patch on a green background. It gave the understaffed Border Patrol a vital edge during the rush hours between dusk and dawn.

"Okay, Gary, we're gonna stay in position for a while. Over."

"Roger. How's Sanchez doin'? Over."

Sanchez leaned into the mike and said, "I'm freezing my *huevos* off. I can't believe this is California. Uh, over."

The laughter came over the speaker, lifeless and metallic. "You'll get your circulation goin' before too long. At least you're not gettin' rocked. Over."

"I'm goin' down to take a look, Gary. Swing that eye around every once in a while, will ya? Over." Hagen poised the mike back over its cradle.

"Got ya covered, 1028. I'm goin' off in a few minutes, but Dave's comin' on. He'll keep ya company, okay? Over. Out."

Hagen opened his door and climbed down out of the van. "You wanna take a look around with me?" he invited.

"Sure." Sanchez lifted his flashlight and his nightstick from the seat. Outside, he felt he was on the surface of some featureless, distant planet.

"Only bring one of those. Keep one hand free," Hagen corrected him.

"Oh, yeah." He followed the other agent to the edge of Dead Man's Canyon and looked down. It was as if a piece of the Earth had fallen away

and they were looking into a starless void. At first there was no sound except for the wind and the engine of a small plane in the distance, and then they both heard a dry rustling below them; it might have been someone whispering. "You hear that?" he asked Hagen quietly.

By way of answer, the older agent aimed his flashlight into the canyon and played it briefly over the *cholla* cactus, the gnarled, hollowed-out bushes known as "hotels" that served as way stations for illegal immigrants on their trek north. The beam found the floor of the canyon and the slight trail that had been worn over the years by illicit traffic. He switched it off quickly. "I don't see anything."

"What about that voice? Didn't you hear that?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I did. I'll tell you what, partner. I'm goin' down there. You run up about fifty yards and move down, kind of head 'em off at the pass."

Sanchez nodded and set off at a trot. A rabbit darted across his path and startled him.

It was a long way from New York, he thought. He had been happy to get the job and the academy was easy enough. The San Diego border sounded pretty exciting, riding the ranges, mending fences, pursuits and arrests. Now that he was here, though, the fantasy had eroded—leaving only the minutiae of routine in an unreal situation. The shabby, hopeless people he apprehended every shift by the dozen saddened him and made him wonder just what kind of a job he was doing after all. The dream of Western Individualism was a fine one and promised—from a distance—to suit him, but in the end he couldn't relate to the cowboy role, not the way Hagen could with his chewing tobacco and his "head 'em off at the pass, pard" manner. First as a Puerto Rican kid growing up in an Irish neighborhood in the Bronx, then as a city adjuster surrounded by friends who were actors, dancers, or writers, and now trying to pass as a good-old-boy member of the posse in the American Southwest, Sanchez increasingly came to define himself by where he did not belong. His gun slapped against his hip as he ran.

After about fifty yards, he started down slowly. The footing was bad and the *cholla* punctured his pant legs. Pieces of the cactus broke off and worked their way into his boots. He stopped at intervals to remove them, listening for the sounds they had heard earlier. To his left he could see Hagen swinging his flashlight. On the wind, Hagen's voice carried down the canyon. In Spanish he shouted, "*La Migra! Salgan!*"

Suddenly the wind increased and two shadows hurtled past Sanchez running up the embankment. They both wore dark clothing. One, he could see, was a woman, probably an Indian—judging by her serape and

braided hair. He turned and shouted, "Hagen! Over here!" and started to labor back up the hill after them. Someone rushed past him from behind; he turned abruptly and landed face down in the *cholla*. Stifling a cry of pain, he caught a glimpse of white tennis shoes running past him. In his Puerto Rican accent, he called after them, "*Alto. No les haremos daño!*"

He got to his feet and made it to the top. To the west, silhouetted against the lights of Tijuana and San Ysidro, he could see the figure wearing the tennis shoes dash across the mesa for the relative safety of the next canyon. Sanchez was in good physical shape for a smoker and he closed the distance between them in seconds just as his prey dropped over the ledge of the next depression. Blood, where the cactus had cut him, fell into Sanchez's eye and he blinked. In another moment he could see, but he had lost the *pollo*. He cursed and turned back toward the Ram Charger.

He froze when he heard Hagen's scream.

Dropping his nightstick and drawing the .357 from his holster, Sanchez ran toward the sound, shouting, "Hagen! Hagen!" At the edge of the canyon he launched himself downward, taking huge strides, barely keeping his balance, unmindful of the cactus. "Hagen, answer me!" It seemed to take forever to get down. At the bottom he found the trail and ran south until he could hear heavy, ragged breathing and a kind of sobbing. "Hagen, goddamnit!"

"Over here." The voice was barely in control. "I'm all right."

"Shine your light so I can find you."

"I can't . . . I lost it."

"What happened?" Sanchez fell into tumbleweeds that had accumulated against the man-made rock break in the trail. He struggled in the weeds for a moment and pulled his Bic lighter and ignited it. The first thing he saw was a crude crucifix set into the top of the pile of rocks he had stumbled against. A grave.

He looked around him and saw Hagen, his eyes ringed with fear, struggling to free himself from another interlocked mass of tumbleweeds. The flashlight lay to his right. Sanchez picked it up and shone it on his companion. "What the hell happened, man?"

As he helped Hagen from the bed of dried bracken and rock he could see the other man's eyes darting to either side of him. He was trembling as if suddenly aware of the cold. "Let's just get out of here, okay?"

They made their way back up the embankment. At the top, they could hear the radio from the van calling into the night. "Ten-twenty-eight,

come in. What's going on, 1028? You read, Hagen? You request assistance?"

Inside the Ram Charger, Sanchez answered the call. "This is 1028. We had something good. They got away. We got fouled up a little. Just some cuts and scrapes, I think. Anybody have a scope on us?"

"This is 901. Dave here. I've had the eye on you for the past ten minutes or so. I saw one of you guys come up out of Dead Man's runnin' across the mesa chasing something, but I don't know what the hell it was. I wasn't getting any hot spots. What were you chasin', anyway? You're the only ones out there."

"You didn't see them? There were three of them. One of 'em was a woman."

"Sorry, buddy. Had my eye peeled and all I got was you."

"Okay. We missed 'em. Forget it. You might want to advise E3 and E2, they might come out somewhere in Spring's or Moody's. Over."

"Roger, you okay?"

"Yeah. Okay. Over."

Sanchez turned to Hagen. He switched on the instrument lights and in the green glow he could see that Hagen had scratches running down one side of his face as if an animal had clawed him. Other than that he seemed unhurt. The older man held his face in his hands and said softly, "My dear God, I am losing my ever-loving mind."

"What happened, man? I heard you scream."

Hagen looked at him. Even in the ghostly light he could see the man was pale. "I can't tell you, Sanchez. I . . . don't really know."

"Tell me. If there's somebody out there, I wanna know, man. Okay?"

Hagen looked at him and drew in a breath. He seemed to size up his partner or maybe how what he was going to say would sound. After a minute he said, "When I got to the bottom, I saw maybe fifty, a hundred people. *Pollos*, wirecutters, illegals, men, women, kids. I couldn't believe it. I'd never seen so many in one place, not since we caught that whole shitload comin' out of the Flamenco years ago. I didn't know what to do. There were too many of them. I turned to go back up and radio in when I slipped. I fell right on top of a group of them and then I saw . . . "He stopped speaking though his jaw continued to work ineffectually. He shook his head and searched the stars for the words.

"What, man? What are you saying?"

His smile was an attempt at reassurance, but seemed instead to be inappropriate and frightening in the dashboard lights. "I don't know. I don't know what I'm saying. Forget it."

"Okay, Hagen. Take it easy."

Something threw itself against the side of the van with a raking sound like ground glass on slate. The wind picked up its keening. Hagen drew his pistol and then the stars were blotted from the windshield by a shape that pressed itself to the van with a rasping, urgent noise.

"Take it easy, man! It's a tumbleweed, Hagen. That's all it is, see. I found you in a bunch of them down there. That's what scratched you up." Even as he said it, Sanchez studied the deep grooves on the agent's cheeks that ran from his temple to his neck and were already beginning to scab over.

"Yeah, tumbleweeds." Hagen put his gun away. "Look, we gotta go out there again. I've gotta see what the hell is going on. You understand? I've gotta know. One minute they were there and the next . . . I've gotta know if I'm crackin' up or what." For the first time Hagen noticed the blood on Sanchez's face. "What happened to you? Your face is cut up."

"I fell in the damned cactus. I was chasing three of them. There's gotta be more. Let's go, only this time we stay together."

"Right." Hagen paused. "Sanchez, you saw 'em, right? You get a good look?"

"I couldn't see anything except one was a woman, a Yaqui, I think, and one guy was wearing white sneakers."

Hagen fixed his partner with a searching look. His fear was infecting Sanchez now. "Did they look, you know . . . regular to you?"

"I don't know, man. I don't know what you mean. I told you I barely saw them at all. You sure you're all right?"

"Yeah, forget it. Let's go."

They opened the doors against the wind.

Their heartbeats and the sound of their boots on the crushed stone of the mesa filled the night.

At the edge of the canyon they both played their beams into the maw of darkness. As if on cue, the wind rose again out of the abyss, tossing dust and branches, bowing the manzanita first one way, then another, as if frenziedly kowtowing to some rising monarch of the underworld. Their lights created wild, protean shadows.

Sanchez saw them first, again. "Over here, Hagen!" He swung his beam to the right, where sounds of sudden movement had drawn his eyes. Several figures had been lying on the brush, just near the top of the canyon. Now they rose and broke for the mesa, running past the two men.

Sanchez gave chase to the one closest to him: a boy in white sneakers.

As he ran he heard Hagen's voice in the distance. "I'll turn on the floodlights on the truck and call in. There's too many."

Sanchez turned his head as he ran; he could just make out, against the stars, dozens of figures to either side of him racing north in eerie silence. He thought he saw the same Indian woman he had chased earlier, but in the darkness it was impossible to be sure.

He lunged at the boy he was chasing, reaching out his hand toward his jacket collar. He flew several feet and hit the ground, his fingers closing on air.

When Sanchez looked up he saw a figure towering over him; a Mexican wearing a straw ranchero's hat and rags, on his face an impossibly wide grin. The man raised what looked like some kind of pale garden tool over his head. He whispered at Sanchez in hoarse Spanish, "The mesa is a lonely place to die, eh, *La Migra*?"

As the figure brought his arm down, Sanchez drew his gun. He fired upward point-blank at the man's chest area. In the brief flash from the muzzle, Sanchez could see that his assailant had no weapon. The white, clawlike tool was his hand and there was no flesh on it.

The image lingered on his retinas, echoing in his mind like the report from the magnum, repeating and decaying through the canyons.

Suddenly, the mesa was bathed with light as Hagen threw on the headlights and floodlamps mounted above the Ram Charger. Over the loud hailer, he called, "*Alto, por favor! La Migra!* There is nowhere for you to go. The sector ahead of you is . . ." He stopped. His words echoed, carried on the wind, and died.

Hagen, like Sanchez, was looking out at the harshly illuminated landscape that should have been covered with running men, women, and children. There was nothing but tumbleweeds, more of them than either of them had ever seen, being carried northward on the wind in oddly graceful leaps, without a sound.

When Sanchez joined Hagen back at the truck, the radio was clamoring for their attention. Hagen ignored it, transfixed by the spectacle of the migrating tumbleweed.

"Come in, 1028. I can see you guys. What's goin' on? What are you shootin' at? Something wrong with your radio?"

Sanchez picked up the call. "Nine-oh-one, this is 1028. You scoping us?"

"Yeah. What are you doing? I just watched you run about fifty yards, jump in the air, land on your face, and fire a round at a ball of dead weeds."

Sanchez and Hagen looked at each other in silence. Finally Hagen shook his head from side to side. Sanchez nodded in agreement and

pressed the button on the side of the mike. "We got . . . uh, a bad visibility situation here. The dust and the wind. We just, uh . . . thought we detected, uh, activity. All's quiet, though. Over."

"Well, you might as well come on in and get coffee. You're not going to get anything now, not down there. We're pickin' 'em up everywhere tonight but Dead Man's. Since midnight it's been *Dia de Muertos* and there's no coyote going to bring anyone through there for twenty-four hours. You know how they are. Over."

"Yeah. Over and out."

"*Dia de Muertos*," Sanchez repeated. He lit a cigarette with shaking hands. "November second."

"Yeah." Hagen kept his hands on the steering wheel to steady them. "All Souls' Day."

"Day of the Dead."

The tumbleweeds continued to dance in the headlights, occasionally throwing themselves against the truck to whisper with dry, brittle voices.

The Scarecrow

Roger Johnson

Roger Johnson's first published story, "The Wall-Painting," was reprinted in The Year's Best Horror Stories: Series XII, and it attracted a great deal of favorable comment. Johnson was another of August Derleth's discoveries, with three sonnets published in The Arkham Collector. Following Derleth's death, Johnson disappeared from the horror genre for more than a decade, until Rosemary Pardoe coaxed him out of limbo. Born in 1947, Johnson has lived most of his life in Chelmsford, Essex—aside from five years at university and at library college (he took his degree, B.A. Honours in English, from London University), and six years living and working in Harlow New Town. Johnson is trying to devise some sort of ghost appropriate for a new town.

"The Scarecrow" was entered some years back for the Times ghost story competition. It failed to place—a distinction shared with Ramsey Campbell's "In the Bag" (which later won the British Fantasy Award for best short fiction) and my own "Sing a Last Song of Valdese" (which the previous editor, Gerald W. Page, selected for The Year's Best Horror Stories: Series V). Says Johnson of this story: "The references to traditional folk song in 'The Scarecrow' reflect my long-time love of British folksong and dance. A fair amount of my spare time is spent at my local folksong clubs and in Morris dancing—not as healthy as jogging, perhaps, but a sight more fun."

"GOING ABROAD, are you?" said old George, incuriously.

"Not this year," I replied. "Mike Williams and I are off to the Cotswolds next month, for a couple of weeks. I came here tonight to tell him that I've arranged for us to stay at a pub in a village near Banbury."

"Oh, yes. Nice little town, Banbury. I rather envy you. What's the name of the village?"

"Saxton Lovell."

"Good God!"

It is never a good thing to surprise a man while he is drinking. Old

George coughed and spluttered for a good half-minute. When he had regained his breath he said: "Then the pub must be—just a moment—the Belchamp Arms?" (He pronounced it "Beecham".)

"That's right. Obviously you know it?"

"Oh, yes," said George, very deliberately. "I know it all right, though I've not been there for nearly fifty years. A little place, just off the road to Chipping Norton. Heh? And some three miles to the west is a hamlet called Normanton Lovell, which has one single and singular distinctive feature."

He paused, in that irritating way of his, and started filling his pipe.

"You're being cryptic," I said severely. "You've roused my curiosity now, and I want to know why. Is there a story behind this?"

The old man smiled sheepishly. "I'm sorry, boy," he said. "Yes, there's a story, though I've not told it in a long time. Ah, well . . . I'll tell it to you if you'll be a good fellow and get me another pint. I think you'll find it worthwhile."

I refilled both our glasses, and after we had taken a good long draught I lit a cigarette and settled back to listen.

It happened while old George Cobbett was an undergraduate, reading Classics at Fisher College, Cambridge, and in those days, of course, he was by no means "old" George. His particular extra-curricular interest then was in the archaeology of ancient Britain, a theme which met with no approval at all from his tutor, and was therefore the more cherished. His particular friend at Cambridge was another Classics scholar, one Lionel Ager, who was privately devoted to the pursuit of English folklore. Already, by the time he entered the University, he was a member of the Folklore Society, and among his correspondents, as he told George, were Alfred Williams and Frank Kidson, the great collectors of traditional song.

George was in his second year at Fisher College when he learned of the stone circles at Normanton Lovell, in Oxfordshire. William Stukely seems not to have known of them, but in the college library's copy of his *Itinerarium Antiquum* George found a handwritten marginal note referring to the Rollright Stones: "What of the Dancers of Normanton Lovell? More like Abury than this nearer neighbor."

The megalithic formations at Avebury (Stukely's "Abury") are unique, as George well knew, both in their design and in their overwhelming size. All the other stone circles that he knew of in Britain—always excepting the uniquely complex structure of Stonehenge—were, like the

Rollright Stones, simple circles of free-standing megaliths, none of which could approach the size or complexity of Avebury.

The riddle of the Dancers came again to his mind that evening, when his friend observed that the long vacation was only three weeks away, and that neither of them had yet made arrangements.

"I know that your people are abroad, Cobbett, and my father's gone to Carlsbad, so we're our own masters at last. Now, I suggest that the two of us go off to Oxfordshire for a few weeks." (George was startled by the coincidence). "I gather it's a rare place for folksongs, which will keep me occupied, and you should find enough of your precious Druid stones to amuse you." Lionel Ager could never be convinced that the Druids were not responsible for Stonehenge and its fellows.

George took the suggestion as a good omen, and immediately proposed that Normanton Lovell should serve as their base for the holiday. A perusal of the Ordnance Survey map of the area failed to prove the existence of the village, but to George's delight the stone circles were clearly marked, and so was the nearby hamlet of Saxton Lovell, where the usual symbol indicated a public house. The decision was made that evening that the two of them would take rooms at the Belchamp Arms (that, they subsequently discovered, was the name of the inn) at Saxton Lovell for six weeks in June and July.

Arriving at the Belchamp Arms, they discovered that there actually was a village of Normanton Lovell—if, that is, half a dozen houses constitute a village. George did not regret his choice of accommodation, however, for the Belchamp Arms was a fine example of the English country inn. The rooms were scrupulously clean, the service cheerful, the food good, and the beer excellent. The local farmers and laborers, too, appreciated the beer, for they thronged the bar of an evening, so the landlord said—an assertion which much pleased Lionel Ager.

The young men spent their first afternoon walking around the pleasant little village, inspecting the romanesque church, and generally working up an appetite for what proved to be a very rewarding dinner. Afterwards they settled themselves in the lounge with a bottle of port, and Ager took the opportunity to ask their host whether there were any notable singers in the area.

"I don't know," replied the landlord, doubtfully, "that we've anyone here that a scholar like yourself would care to hear. There's Tommy Wells, now, who plays the organ—he can sing fine, but I reckon all he knows is hymns, and between ourselves that's all right on Sundays, but I reckon a man needs a change during the week."

That, said Ager, was just what he meant. Did any of the farmworkers or such people come into the inn and sing?

"Why, bless you, yes! If you don't mind its not being polished like, just you come into the bar a little later on. Old Harry Arnold'll be in about eight—he's got a fine, strong voice—and then there's Dennis Poacher and Percy Forrest and . . ."

Laughing, the two friends assured him that it all sounded most satisfactory. The landlord, gratified, left them, and they fell to talking of those enigmatic stone circles that George planned to visit in the morning.

As they entered the bar, the landlord informed them that old Harry had just arrived, and that was him sitting over there, the big, red-faced man, and yes, surely he'd be pleased to sing for the gentlemen. Introductions were made, and Harry Arnold indicated in the subtlest way possible that he couldn't sing without something to wet his throat. That attended to, George sat back while his friend sat about drawing songs from the obligingly extrovert farmer. Soon Lionel Ager himself had been drawn into the singing, and he and Harry Arnold were swapping songs for all the world as if they were old friends. Even George was induced to join in the choruses, while the landlord grinned broadly behind his bar.

"I remember very little about the songs that were sung that evening," George told me, "though no doubt I've heard some of them many times since. The one that clings to my mind was a very intense, very powerful performance by Farmer Arnold of the ballad of John Barleycorn—the death and resurrection of the corn. He shut his eyes and threw his head back and sang as though every word and every note was forcing its way up from the very bones of him. He well deserved the pint of beer that the landlord gave him, and Ager's almost tearful congratulations. It was a remarkable performance, really remarkable."

The next song, though was something quite different. Harry Arnold took a deep draught from his mug and, mopping his forehead with a large spotted handkerchief, called to a stocky, weatherbeaten man who had been in the forefront of the choruses: "Dennis! Dennis Poacher! Give us 'Rolling of the Stones,' will you? It's a long time since I heard that, boy, and I'd dearly like to hear it again."

"Now that," thought George, "is a damned queer name for a song." And his mind turned for an instant to the megalithic remains he had come to see.

The stocky man began to sing in a clear and surprisingly gentle voice: "Will you go to the rolling of the stones, the tossing of the ball . . . ?" A curiously enigmatic and charming fragment—surely a mere part of a

longer song. George's thought was interrupted by the sympathetic voice of Harry Arnold.

"Does me good to hear it again, sir, that does. But there's no denying it's a strange sort of song. I can see you're wondering at it, and so did I when I first heard it. My mother used to sing that to me when I was a little child, and I always used to wonder at that bit about 'the rolling of the stones.' Of course, that's plain when you think about it—they mean fivestones—what my dad called knucklebones. But d'you know, the first stones that come to my mind over that was those great rings over Normanton way. Them, and that clump of 'em on our own farm—what we call Hell's Gate."

George couldn't help smiling. "Hell's Gate!" There was a name to conjure with! He was a little surprised to realize that, after all, with half a bottle of port and more than a few pints of beer inside him he was really not quite sober. If he were, he would not be attaching any weight to the absurd name of a mere group of standing stones. He observed that on the far side of the farmer, Lionel Ager's attention was confusedly divided between the singer (it was another singer now) and Harry Arnold. "Hell's Gate?" George repeated, hesitantly.

"That's right," said Harry. "Over in Nick's Meadow, it is—though that's never been a meadow ever to my knowing. Always been ploughed over, that has." He looked around at the two young men, and his broad red face broke into a grin, showing strong teeth. "You want to hear the story? Well, why not? It's quite a little ghost story, and it may interest you."

He drained his mug and set it down on the table. "It's this way, you see—you know the name of this pub, the Belchamp Arms? Well, you won't find any Belchamps around here now, but for many long years they was the lords of the manor. The head of the family was always called Squire Belchamp, and it had to be Yes, Squire, and touch your cap, or by God, he'd know why! Now, this man was the very last Squire Belchamp, and he used to go over to them stones at night—without a by-your-leave to the farmer, of course—and he'd do things there that, well, I reckon they gave the name of Hell's Gate to the stones. O' course, all this was something like a hundred years ago, now . . ."

Sir Richard Belchamp, as Harry Arnold explained, was something more than the traditional wicked squire. Certainly he was an unbending autocrat, an eccentric to the point of madness. Equally certainly he had a strong reputation as a whoremaster, and was rather less widely thought to be a necromancer. Legends of his diverse misdeeds were not uncommon in the neighborhood even now, particularly the tale that Harry Arnold told of the squire's final sin, which led directly to his unmourned

death. He had been caught in a rather horrid act, at those same stones, by the father of a young woman who was unwillingly involved. The father was a farmer—in fact, the owner of the land where the megaliths stood—and a man of few words and telling action. Being rightfully incensed, he took a staff and quite simply beat the squire to death.

There must have been some juggling with the law, for at his trial the farmer received the surprisingly lenient sentence of five years' hard labour. He accepted this fate with calm resignation, for he knew that justice had already been served; whatever the law might do now could not alter that fact. His sons were strong, and well able to care for the farm in his absence. The one thing that troubled him was very slight at first, but through the years in jail it grew, and it gnawed more and more at his mind. Sir Richard Belchamp had cursed his killer as he died, and the curse was an awful one: "Hell shall lie within your farm, and your filthy scarecrow shall be its gateman!"

Yes, there was a scarecrow in Nick's Meadow, a harmless thing, if old and ugly. Still, the farmer's sons had taken it down when they heard of the squire's words, and thrown it into a corner of the old barn, and there it had lain, untouched but much thought of, through five long years.

The farmer was welcomed most heartily upon his release from jail. Food and drink were provided in quantity, and all ate and drank—some a little too freely, perhaps, for it seems that no one noticed just when, in the early hours of the morning, the farmer left the house. He did not return.

They found him some while after dawn, lying among the great stones, crouched in an attitude of fear, though the fear did not show upon his features, for the whole body was most terribly burned. Yet there was no other evidence of a fire, and the night had been rainy. And the scarecrow? Somehow or other the scarecrow had found its way back into its old place in the middle of the field, and now stood, as large as life, staring with its empty sockets at the appalling scene.

Harry Arnold smiled broadly and signaled to the landlord to refill his mug. "Nice little story, ain't it?" he said.

"Nice little—Ye gods!" thought George. "Interesting," he ventured.

"*Fascinating!*" said Lionel Ager. His face was gleaming with the disinterested delight of the scholar, and beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. "Absolutely remarkable. So coherent . . ."

"These stones are still there?" he asked abruptly. "On your farm?"

"On my farm," Harry Arnold agreed. "You see, that old farmer, he was my great great grandfather."

"Remarkable!" Ager exclaimed again. "And what of the scarecrow?"

"Well, I don't suppose it's the same one—not likely, is it?—but there's still a scarecrow in that field. We reckon to let well enough alone, and every seed-time out he comes from the barn, and when he's not needed in the field, we put him back there. Matter o' fact, we do tend to let him stay in the field rather longer than needful. We reckon he belongs there, and we want to do the right thing by him."

George Cobbett did not like the way the conversation was tending. It took a morbid turn, he thought, and he disliked the morbid, but I should say that he had no presentiment of what would happen, and in any case he didn't believe in such warnings. He was very young.

His friend continued to question the farmer. Had there been other evidence of this gateway to Hell? he asked—but Harry was vague upon that point, and unwilling to commit himself. It was true that over the decades some people had disappeared or died mysteriously, but that may happen anywhere. No, nothing certain could be said.

Ager fell silent, and George took the opportunity to steer the conversation toward the stone circles at Normanton Lovell. They were still engrossed in that subject when the landlord firmly called "Time!" and amid a clattering of heavy boots, a jingling of glasses, and a cheerful buzz of talk the bar started to empty. Harry gave the young men his enormous hand, and expressed the hope that they'd meet again next day. And so Harry Arnold set off home, and George Cobbett and Lionel Ager—the later still preoccupied—went upstairs to bed.

At breakfast, Ager's first words were: "Do you realize that it's Midsummer Eve in six days' time?"

"What of it?" replied George.

"Just this: that Midsummer Eve is rather like Hallowe'en, when ghosts and witches walk abroad."

With an expressive snort, George returned to his bacon and eggs, but stopped abruptly when he realized his friend's implication. "Oh, God! You don't mean that you're going to follow up Farmer Arnold's ghost story?"

"I mean that we are going to follow up Harry's story."

"We most certainly are not! I came down here to look at megalithic remains, and that's what I'm going to do. You can go ghost-hunting if you like, but count me out."

George was adamant on this, though he could see that his friend was disappointed. Lionel Ager was equally adamant. "I can't pass up a chance like this," he said. "Don't you see how important it is? The Folklore

Society will be delighted to get this story, but it must be investigated properly. Even if you won't come with me—and even if Harry Arnold won't agree—on Midsummer Eve I'm going to Nick's Meadow to see if anything happens."

"All that will happen is that you'll catch pneumonia," observed George, but he was uneasy, all the same.

It was agreed after breakfast that George should accompany his friend to Nick's Meadow. They both, after all, wanted to see the stones that Farmer Arnold so picturesquely called Hell's Gate, but George's interest was purely archaeological, and he had no wish to see the demon scarecrow.

"I did see it, though," he told me. "And I can see it now, quite clearly. It was a horrid, tatty-looking thing, with most of the straw stuffing gone from it. The clothes, too—I don't know how they held together. They were threadbare and rotten. I think that the coat had once been black, but it was a dull, nasty green now. For all I know, they might have belonged to the original scarecrow, back in Sir Richard's day. And the face—my God! The head had been carved from a turnip, and it was all shriveled and wizened, but there was a distinct and rather frightening expression. The half-moon grin and the vacant eye-sockets combined to give a look of utter and menacing idiocy!"

Even Lionel Ager was glad to turn his attention to the group of stones that stood on the western side of the field. Their curious formation held a different interest for each of the young men; to George the central stones were possibly of unique archaeological importance, as the only genuine trilithon he knew of in Britain outside Stonehenge, but to Ager the shape formed by one massive stone lying as a lintel on two great megalithic posts served to reinforce the idea of a gateway. "Hell's Gate!" he muttered. "Hell's Gate indeed! Cobbett—" (he turned abruptly to George), "I simply can't miss this opportunity. Are you quite sure you won't come and watch with me?"

George thought of the scarecrow's face, and furiously dismissed the image from his mind. "I won't come," he said. "It's a very silly business, and besides, I see no fun in spending the night in a field when there's a comfortable bed back at the inn."

Ager merely grunted. Evidently his own determination was fixed, and Midsummer Eve would see him in Nick's Meadow, watching for the gateway to Hell. From then on the matter seemed to bar all other ideas from his mind. This was to be a major contribution to folklore, and not until he had seen it through would he return to more mundane matters.

He made no demur at George's suggestion that they go and look at

the stones of Normanton Lovell, some two miles away, but he spoke little as they walked along the narrow roads, and his thoughts were set on Nick's Meadow and Hell's Gate.

Harry Arnold was not well pleased when Ager told him of his plan, but he could give no concrete or coherent reason why the young man should not stay the haunted night in the haunted field. Seeing that his advice to "leave well enough alone" had no effect, he grudgingly acquiesced. "You'd go anyway," he observed, "so you may as well go with my permission."

When Midsummer Eve came around, he came into the Belchamp Arms looking rather embarrassed, and carrying a shotgun. "You've forced an argument on me," he said, "and for your own sake I'll force one on you. You'll take this gun with you tonight. I don't know that it'll be of protection to you, but it may be, and I'll sleep sounder for knowing you have it."

Rather reluctantly, Ager took the weapon, and thanked the farmer for his concern. Harry had not finished, though. "There's one more thing. I want you to promise that you'll stay on the east side of the field—away from the stones." To George's surprise, and rather to his relief, Ager agreed, smiling wryly as he saw the farmer's face clear. "Good lad," said Harry, and clapped him on the back.

Even so, Harry insisted upon accompanying Ager from the inn at closing time, so that he could be sure when he went to his bed that the young man was keeping to the agreement. George approved of this notion, and when the landlord called time he went with them to Nick's Meadow. He could do nothing more, save offer to share the vigil, and he was not prepared to do that.

With Ager settled fairly comfortably on a traveling rug, the shotgun and a flask of whiskey beside him, good-byes were said, and George Cobbett and Harry Arnold went their ways.

George had difficulty in sleeping at first. Although he was very tired, his mind was so full that there seemed no room for sleep. Curiously, whenever he shut his eyes, one image predominated, making a clear picture, so disturbing that he had to open them again. It was as if he sat alone on the eastern side of Nick's Meadow, gazing across the field at the strange cluster of menhirs, and seeing the gateway formed by the trilithon, which stood out clearly among them. It was odd that the stones appeared so sharply to his inner eye, for in fact he could see nothing else—nothing at all. The blackness that covered all—all but that unpleasantly distinct image of Hell's Gate—was so very black as to be the

darkness of the tomb rather than of night. It was almost like a living thing, and it hid everything but those damnable stones.

No, not quite everything, as he discovered the fourth or fifth time that his eyelids involuntarily closed. Far off, by the stones, and silhouetted against their very distinct image, seeming tiny by comparison, was an awkwardly moving figure. It was more human than animal, as far as he could tell, and yet not quite human either. It was walking in a very unnatural manner, almost, he reflected, like a wooden doll that is made to caricature its young owner's gauche stride.

By the time George Cobbett realized that the gaunt figure's awkward movement was bringing it rapidly through the stygian blackness toward him, he was struggling to stay awake. But our bodies at their best respond perversely to our minds, and George found himself fitfully dozing, and observing with something like terror the progress of the black, featureless creature across the black, featureless field. As it drew nearer, he found that it brought with it waves of heat, as though furnace doors had been opened—an evil-smelling heat, but with no accompanying light. Whatever illuminated the stones remained itself hidden, and still no features could be discerned on the gothic silhouette that approached him.

Yet something about it—something in that damnably sharp, gaunt outline—scratched at the doors of memory in his brain, and he fought against recognition, while knowing that it could make no ultimate difference.

The heat became—not unbearable, for he bore it—but, like that appalling darkness, it seemed to take on a life of its own, a pulsating life, as though it was generated by some great, unimaginable heart. The figure came ever closer, its stride implacable and unhindered. It moved so stiffly, as though it had no knee-joints. Its arms were spread wide, as though fixed in a mockery of benediction. Its head—ah! its head was small and round, wrinkled and very, very old. Rank shreds and tatters of clothing flapped from its thin frame, and now he could see coals of fire within the deep eye-sockets, as finally it stood before him, and the crushing waves of heat brought with them great gusts of a mirthless laughter.

The doors broke open, and George Cobbett awoke, screaming, to find himself alone and secure in his room at the Belchamp Arms. Almost sobbing with relief, he lay back on his pillow and expelled his breath in a long sigh. God, what a dream! And what a story to tell Ager in the morning! He smiled a little at the unexpected depths of his own imagination, and, feeling sleep approaching again, he turned onto his side and let it come.

He slept easily this time, falling almost immediately into a dreamless slumber, and did not wake again until a heavy knocking at his door aroused him at about half-past-six. Only half-awake, he climbed from his bed and opened the door to his untimely visitors. A yawn became a gasp of incredulity as he saw the urgent faces of the landlord and Harry Arnold, the latter biting his lip nervously, but with fear in his eyes.

The farmer had risen early as usual that Midsummer morning, and gone straight to Nick's Meadow to see how Lionel Ager had fared. In the meadow he had found Ager's body, and he had stood, looking at it, for a long horrible moment, unable to move. It lay between the uprights of the trilithon—Hell's Gate indeed!—and it was hideously burned. The whole corpse was blackened and charred, and still smoking a little, and the face was quite unrecognizable. The hands, clutching the twisted frame of the shotgun, had actually broken around the weapon.

"I couldn't touch it," said Harry, later. "And I dared not, for fear it would crumble into ash."

And yet, despite the condition of the body, Lionel Ager's clothes were quite unharmed, except that they were damp with the summer dew.

Harry Arnold had turned and shook his great fist at the scarecrow. "Old devil!" he cried. And then he saw that the scarecrow had somehow been turned around during the night, and now stood facing the group of standing stones. On its turnip face, the crudely carved features no longer wore their customary vacant aspect, but had twisted themselves into an expression of malign triumph.

My cigarette had long since burned itself out in the ashtray, and I had hardly touched my beer. Old George's hands were shaking a little as he fumbled with his tobacco pouch and pipe. I knew that anything I could say would be inadequate, but I said it anyway: "That's quite astonishing. Quite astonishing."

George was silent for a moment, while he re-lit his pipe. When he had it drawing to his satisfaction, he looked up and stared gloomily at me. "It was a pretty village," he said. "And those stones were really remarkable. But you can understand now why I've never been back there."

The End of the World

James B. Hemesath

James B. Hemesath responded to my request for background information with some interesting notes on the history of his story, "The End of the World," published in WIND/Literary Journal.

"I was born April 25, 1944, in New Hampton, Iowa. After high school I spent three years in the Marine Corps. I'm married (Myrna) and I have a seven-year-old son (Chad). My higher education includes a Master of Fine Arts in English from the University of Iowa Writers Workshop. Currently, I'm the Librarian at Western Montana College, Dillon, Montana. Before that, I was the Librarian at Huron College, Huron, South Dakota. 'The End of the World' was written during my stay in South Dakota. A shorter, much earlier version of this story (with a different title) received an honorable mention in the annual Writer's Digest fiction competition. Yet another early version of the story helped in my receiving a \$500 fiction-writing grant from the South Dakota Arts Board. All told—I've been writing for approximately twenty years; in recent times, I've turned out one, maybe two new stories yearly. During any given year I spend a lot of time rethinking/rewriting stories from previous years. 'The End of the World,' for example, was written one year, then rewritten and expanded over a two- or three-year period. As you might guess—I'm not prolific."

Hemesath has had short fiction published in Again, Dangerous Visions, as well as in Fantasy Book, Eldritch Tales, Just Pulp, Coe Review, Dare, Blue Light Review, and Each Step I Take. He also reviews fiction for Library Journal.

HE HAD COUNTED telephone poles for the first hour; next, farm houses; finally, deserted farm houses. Ralph Watson stared through the bug-splattered windshield. In the shimmering distance along a two-lane highway that ran straight as a rifle barrel, a solitary grain elevator rose from the surrounding dusty-green earth like the front sight of a high-powered rifle. Next to him his wife, Jane, pondered the television listings

in a *New York Times* that she had brought with her. She wore a red halter top and blue gym shorts. A leather sandal hung from the big toe of her crossed leg.

"Are you sure they have public television?"

"The night before the interview," Ralph said, "I watched *Dance in America* in my hotel room. Baryshnikov."

"That was on in New York months ago."

"I probably saw a re-run."

"I doubt it."

"It's summer, Jane."

"Tell me about it!"

"I don't want to fight." Ralph pondered the grain elevator. It didn't seem any closer. Poor Jane! He increased the pressure of his foot on the gas pedal. The speedometer crept past 60 mph. She wanted to be at her father's summer house in Vermont. Instead, they were en route to Ralph's new position as academic dean at a college that neither of them had heard of a month ago.

Two weeks ago Redemption College had flown Ralph from New York to the interview. On the final hop of a late afternoon flight from Minneapolis-St. Paul, he had shielded his eyes to look out the tiny window next to his seat. The wing tip of the Republic Convair, transformed by the sun into a fiery knife point, cut through the airy void. The Great Plains unrolled beneath his feet like a bolt of dull green cloth. An enormous world with plenty of elbow room for an ambitious young man.

Driving across those same plains was something else. The flat countryside rolled past like a conveyor belt. Overhead, the late-August sun rode roughshod through a cloudless sky. Ralph drove with his elbow out the window. It glistened with suntan lotion. A white bath towel draped across the window sill protected his upper arm from the scorching metal.

In the endless fields alongside the highway, the knee-high corn stirred in the stiff, hot breeze. Ralph wondered if it was dead of the drought. No rain for weeks, the TV weatherman had said the night before in their motel room in Sioux Falls. If one stopped the car and listened, the leafy stalks crackled in the breeze—a sound like the breaking of tiny bones. Ralph imagined the corn stalks turning to dust before his eyes.

"Look at those pathetic trees," Jane said, pointing at the ragged, thin-ranked cottonwoods that protected yet another deserted farm house from the prevailing wind. They were stunted, dying of thirst, slump-shouldered. Ralph pretended to ignore her. Still, in the yard of that abandoned and windowless farm house, he had seen a load of tattered

wash on the clothes line. He wondered how many years ago it had been put out to dry and forgotten.

Ralph pressed the gas pedal still harder—69, 70, 71 mph.

“Dad!” Ralph glanced at the rear view mirror. His six year old son, Bobby, stared back. Slashes of red warpaint colored his face. The work of a felt-tip marker. A souvenir turkey feather jutted from his blond hair. “You’re going too fast.”

Ralph eased his foot off the gas.

Fifteen minutes later, the highway he had traveled since mid-morning ended abruptly at a T-intersection with a north-south highway. Straight ahead was the dazzlingly-white, monolithic grain elevator that Ralph had pursued for miles. A gas station squatted in its shadow. To get to Redemption, where Ralph’s job was, he would have to go north.

“I better fill the tank.”

“Ralph, I hope the bathroom’s clean,” said Jane, slipping into a t-shirt. It sounded like a threat.

“I’m thirsty, Dad!”

Ralph pulled away from the bullet-riddled stop sign, across the north-south highway, and into the dusty parking lot. A brand-new, electronic gas pump offered both regular and unleaded. The building was two-story, flat-roofed, a pile of cement blocks. Sometime ago those blocks had been painted barn red, but the color had weathered to a rusty brown. BESSERMAN’S GAS & GROCERY was painted in wobbly black letters across the top two rows.

Ralph honked.

Turning toward Jane, he saw that she had hunched her shoulders to diminish the size of her breasts. He felt guilty about taking the job.

He switched off the ignition. The motor ran on for several seconds, missing and sputtering, shaking them like cans of paint.

“I turned it off too fast,” he explained.

Bobby agreed with him from the back seat.

Jane said nothing.

He tried to relax.

Swirls of dusk pirouetted across the parking lot. He grinned: *Dance in South Dakota*. A grasshopper, landing on the windshield, seemed to stare at him through the dirty glass, its tiny jaws moving up-&-down like a ventriloquist’s dummy. Two more landed. Ralph wondered what they ate during a drought. His mood darkened. He pushed the wiper button and swept them away.

He honked again.

Moments later, a thin-faced man in bib overalls stepped from the cool

darkness of the service bay. Behind him, perched atop the hydraulic lift, was a piece of farm equipment that Ralph didn't recognize. He would have to learn more about farming. The man stroked and twisted his jaw. He probably had false teeth. His now smiling face was a maze of cracks and crevices that mirrored the condition of the bone-dry countryside. His dusty yellow hair looked as if it had been combed straight-back by the wind. Ralph pretended to study the contents of his billfold. No doubt Jane stared straight-ahead, while Bobby stared directly at the man.

Ralph looked up. "Fill it with unleaded," he said.

"Sure thing, mister." The man braced himself against the car, his body tilted, his eroded face inches from Ralph's. "You're the first New York plates I've seen this summer."

"Glad to be in South Dakota," Ralph said, trying to be friendly.

"I've been to New York. I was there during the war." He poked a greasy hand at Ralph. "My name's Cletus Besserman. Army. I shipped out of Brooklyn in 1944 . . ."

"We're from Utica," Ralph said, shaking hands, "that's upstate . . ."

"Same difference," Cletus Besserman said. "I've been to England, France, and Germany. After the war, I met a cousin who lived in Düsseldorf. She hated Hitler. That didn't surprise me. My dad hated Hoover."

Ralph nodded.

"Where you headed? Mount Rushmore?" Shreds of tobacco glistened between his snowy teeth. "Be sure to stop at Wall Drug."

"We've seen the signs," Ralph said. "Free ice water . . ."

"I'm an Indian," Bobby blurted from the back seat.

"No, you're not," the man snapped, mopping his face with his greasy hand. "I know one of them when I see one." His smile faded. "I damn well do."

"The boy's just playing," Ralph said. "I told him that South Dakota has a lot of Native Americans."

"West of here, west of Redemption, across the Missouri River."

"I want to be an Indian," Bobby said, "I want to be Tonto."

The man stared open-mouthed at Bobby.

"We're going to Redemption," Ralph said, trying to change the subject. "I'm with Redemption College."

"Ralph," Jane said, "I want to get going."

"Don't you have to?"

"No!"

"Well, I do." He opened the door, edging the man back. "Come on, Bobby! We've got a long drive ahead of us. Let's get a soda."

Jane flung open her car door and got out.

Cletus Besserman said, "The washroom's inside, ma'am. It's the door between the bread rack and the beer. Coke costs a quarter. There's a nickle deposit if you take the bottle."

Jane said nothing.

Ralph nodded. His body ached and swayed. The sun and heat buckled his knees, while the wind kept him from falling. Jane grumbled and sweated at his side. They hurried into the shade cast across the gas station by the grain elevator. It was the difference between night and day. Turning, Ralph saw Cletus Besserman and Bobby in conversation.

Why had he stopped here? Jane would be out for blood all the way to Redemption, his blood.

"Come here, Bobby!" Ralph grinned like a Cheshire cat to hide his irritation. "Get the windshield, too. Okay, Mr. Besserman?"

"Sure thing." Besserman nudged the child toward them. Bobby kicked at the dust. It swirled about his shoulders and legs like a blanket, and he gasped for breath.

Jane rushed several feet into the sunshine, grabbed Bobby by the arm, then retreated.

"What did he want?" she whispered. By the urgency in her voice, Ralph knew that she would turn on him next.

"Tell us," he demanded, "or you don't get a soda." He wanted to keep peace with Jane. He grabbed Bobby by the shoulders and shook him.

"No need to get worked up." Cletus Besserman stood just outside the rim of darkness. "I was just telling your boy the truth."

"The truth about what?" Ralph said, grinding his teeth together. He felt a little foolish. Maybe he should punch Jane in the nose. "We'd like to hear what you told him."

"Good," Cletus Besserman said, "I'm glad to hear that." He coughed, clearing his throat of the swirling dust. "When I was your boy's age, my dad and I—God rest his parched bones—drove his Model-T truck to Mobridge, then across the Missouri onto the Standing Rock reservation. To make a long story short—my dad sold me to a medicine man. A lot of farmers and ranchers did the same thing that summer. 1934. They had to. We needed the rain."

"That's some childhood, Mr. Besserman." Ralph forced a smile and pushed open the door to the grocery. The air conditioning hit him like a blizzard. He motioned Jane and Bobby in after him. Mr. Besserman followed.

"It's pretty dry this summer," he said. "You wouldn't want to sell that boy, would you?"

"No thanks," Ralph said, "I like him too much."

Jane glared at Ralph. He nudged her toward the bathroom.

"That's the problem today. Folks don't have enough kids to spare one or two."

A color TV was mounted on the wall opposite the cash register. Jane had stopped momentarily to stare at her favorite soap opera. She and Bobby were now in the restroom.

Ralph heard Bobby's complaint, the rush of running water, Jane's harsh voice. He surveyed the room. The wall beneath the TV was plastered with posters for farm and livestock auctions. Nearby was a glass-faced wooden cabinet that offered an assortment of rifles and shotguns for sale. Maybe he should buy a gun. Another wall was decorated with fishing poles for sale. Ralph grunted at the irony of that. Meanwhile, Mr. Besserman dutifully checked Ralph's credit card against a list of stolen and canceled cards.

Ralph kept his distance.

Bobby emerged from the bathroom, his face scrubbed clean and the feather gone. He was fighting back tears. Ralph gave him a quarter.

Bobby whined, "I want to be an Indian . . ."

"Shut up," Ralph said, "just shut up."

He waited for the sound of Jane flushing the toilet. They met at the doorway. "Bobby's playing pinball," he said. Her eyes were glazed. She had taken a Valium. "It'll be okay," he said, "you'll see."

"I doubt it," she said.

The bathroom was as he had imagined: dirty. He flipped up the toilet seat. A bumper sticker was stuck piecemeal to the underside: EAT LAMB! 10,000 COYOTES CAN'T BE WRONG! He hoped Jane hadn't seen that. She would never eat mutton again.

In the end, Jane delayed their departure to watch the final few minutes of her soap opera. She seemed calmer. Mr. Besserman followed the three of them outside. The windshield was still dirty.

"Forget it," Ralph said.

"No trouble," said Mr. Besserman. He took great care with the windshield, washing it, chipping the dead bugs with an ice scraper, then washing it again.

"Thanks much," Ralph said.

"Just keep in mind what I said."

"Right."

"It's a dry summer."

"Right."

"Your boy could make a difference."

"Fuck you!" shouted Jane.

A stunned Ralph hit the gas. My God! He was the academic dean at Redemption College. What if this guy knew somebody on the board of trustees? Cletus Besserman disappeared into a cloud of dust and grasshoppers. He could only hope for the best. The rear view mirror was greasy with his fingerprints. They had been on the road a long time.

After a few miles, Jane said, "That man wasn't kidding. He wanted to buy Bobby."

"Don't be silly," Ralph said. "He's been out in the sun too long."

Just the same, Ralph pushed the gas pedal a little harder. Bobby sat quietly in the back seat drinking a bottle of soda. He looked a little dazed.

"I hate that word," Jane said. "I hate it when you swear. I don't know why I said it. I hate that word."

Ralph nodded. He couldn't think of anything funny to say. He wished now that he had taken her along for the interview. They could have sat in the hotel room watching public television. Perhaps that would have been enough to convince her that this was not the end of the world. Perhaps she would have persuaded him not to take the job. An occasional car or truck passed going in the opposite direction. A semi pulled up from behind, honked twice, then swung nerve-wrackingly around them at far beyond the speed limit. Stunted corn, dead-brown pasture land and deserted farm houses floated past. One house with its sagging front porch resembled an old man without his false teeth. The window sills of yet another were just inches above the ground. Perhaps the earth was swallowing it.

Reaching to turn on the radio, Ralph took his eyes off the road. He didn't see what it was he hit, just heard a solid thud, then felt it bounce once, twice against the undercarriage of the car.

"What was that?" asked Jane, her attention distracted from the *Times* crossword puzzle.

Jumping to his feet, Bobby stared out the rear window. "You hit something." He started to cry.

"Don't stand on the back seat," shouted Ralph. "I'm tired of telling you that!" Braking to a gentle stop, Ralph pulled off the road. He took a deep breath, then put the car into reverse.

Whatever it was—the size of a full-grown dachshund—it was still alive. The creature emitted a high-pitched squeal.

"A jack rabbit," Ralph said, "you can tell by the size of its ears and hind legs."

They didn't get out of the car.

"I'm not going to be sick," Jane said. "I'm not."

Bobby glared at Ralph. "You were going too fast."

"Be quiet," said Ralph.

The jack rabbit lay stretched-out on the highway. Its ruby-colored guts shone against the white concrete in the late-afternoon sun. Broken bones like knitting needles protruded from the torn flesh and fur. The eye that Ralph could see blinked with the bothersome regularity of a fluttering TV picture.

"What should we do?" asked Bobby.

"Take it to a vet," said Jane.

Ralph groaned, thinking of the inside of the car.

While they argued, a late-model, four-wheel-drive pickup truck with Besserman's Gas & Grocery printed on the door stopped across the highway from them. An angular section of welded steel with several trowel-like blades was chained to the truck bed. Probably a replacement part for the piece of farm equipment that Ralph hadn't recognized. Ralph hoped this particular Besserman or whoever he was wouldn't be as spooky as Cletus.

"Have car trouble?" It was a boy about fifteen.

"Sort of." Ralph hesitated.

From the blind side of the truck, a mongrel German Shepherd bolted across the driver's lap and through the open window, landing squarely on all fours on the pavement. He bared his teeth, growling from deep inside his throat. It sounded like a buzz saw cutting through hardwood.

"Damn you, Cody!" the boy cursed. "Get back in here."

The dog charged the rabbit, biting into its torn midsection, violently shaking it from side-to-side like a hunk of raw meat. Both Jane and Bobby screamed. A shower of blood cascaded across the pavement, staining the dead-brown grass at the edge of the road. Poxlike drops of blood spotted Ralph's arm and the white towel. He wondered what the side of his car looked like. The truck was spotted with blood. The boy wiped blood from his face with a blue handkerchief. He was out of the truck, stalking toward the dog. He kicked it hard in the ribs. Again. The dog cowered at his feet, the rabbit forgotten.

"I thought you were out of gas," the boy complained. His white t-shirt was flecked with blood. "If I'd known you'd hit a jack, I wouldn't have bothered to stop."

"We're new out here," Ralph said.

"I hope I didn't hurt Cody." The boy's hair hung in his eyes. The wind hadn't yet combed it straight-back or carved character into his bland face. He nudged the dog with his boot. "Get into the truck, Cody!" The dog obeyed.

"Is Cletus Besserman your father?"

"So you stopped at the station," the boy said, turning a small smile for the first time. "No, I just work for Cletus. He owns that and the grain elevator. He's a little crazy these days with the drought. The elevator's been empty for two years. The bank's ready to foreclose. Did he offer to buy your boy?"

Ralph nodded.

"It figures. He's been pestering my dad about me, too. Cletus wants to go out on the reservation and talk some half-drunk Indian into a rain dance. Cletus' old man sold him to the Indians when he was a boy. Lots of people did it back then during the Great Depression. My dad says there's a state law that forbids it now."

"Did it rain?" Ralph asked.

"I don't know."

"What happened to the children?" Ralph felt Bobby's fingernails dig into his neck. Perhaps this would cure him of wanting to be an Indian.

"I don't know," the boy said. "My dad says that Cletus ran away. Maybe the Indians raised the others as their own. Maybe the dogs ate them. I don't know."

For the next couple of hours, Ralph drove the speed limit. He kept both hands on the steering wheel, checked his side view and rear view mirrors. He thought about Cletus Besserman and the drought. Bobby slept uneasily in the back seat. Jane said nothing, lost again in the nearly week-old *New York Times*.

In the west, the setting sun was turning the horizon into a river of blood. Ralph wished he had a camera. The photo might win a prize.

A few miles later, Ralph hit a prairie dog with his right front tire. Jane didn't notice. The tiny crunch sounded like a bite taken out of an apple.

Eventually, Ralph started to count.

"Four, five, six . . ."

"What are you doing?" asked Jane.

"Counting."

"Counting what? Empty houses?"

"No, I'm counting the dead animals on the highway."

"That's crazy," Jane shouted, not looking up from the *Times* crossword puzzle. "So just stop it."

Ralph drove deeper and deeper into the twilight haze. His eyes ached and burned. You're right, he said to himself, I've been driving too long. He pushed the gas pedal to the floor. They had best get to Redemption as quickly as possible. Certainly before nightfall. In the rear view mirror he thought he saw another car in the far distance. For the next few miles he stared straight-ahead at the highway. He started counting the dead

animals again. He killed yet another prairie dog. Rechecking the mirror he saw that the car was a pickup truck, the same dirty green as the boy's.

Ralph pushed the gas pedal still harder. He imagined his foot breaking through the floorboards and striking the concrete. Shreds of shoe leather, bits of bone and flesh, and a shower of blood splattered his blue jeans. The pickup truck had inched closer. Behind it he saw Indians on horseback, their naked bodies streaked with paint.

"Jane," he said, "something's wrong, something's terribly wrong." He glanced at his wife. She was slumped against the door. No doubt she had taken another Valium. Maybe two or three. He knew better than to try to wake her. She would be groggy, dazed, more of a problem than a solution. He thought of waking Bobby.

The pickup truck and the Indians were gaining. Straight ahead the highway was dotted with the remains of dead animals. He swerved to avoid something not-quite-yet dead. Probably a farmer's dog or a coyote. In the rear view mirror he saw it get up from the pavement and join in the pursuit.

"Bobby," he said, half-turning to shake his son in the back seat. "Wake-up!"

The kid grunted, trying to dig himself deeper into the seat cushion. Ralph tried again. This time he grabbed Bobby by the waist and shook him. He pulled his hand away in frustration. The damned kid had wet his pants! It was hopeless, he thought, I'll have to go it alone.

In a few minutes it would be night, the sun finally dropping below the edge of the prairie. Ralph braced the steering wheel with his knees and rubbed his eyes with both hands. I'm hallucinating, he thought, I know that. When I open my eyes there will be nothing but highway behind us.

A fraction of a second before the impact, Ralph opened his eyes and flung his hands against the windshield to hold it in place. He was reaching into a spider's web. A nightmare explosion of glass washed across his body. He had hit something, something big. Probably a cow. The shaggy brown creature had erupted from the pavement and somehow landed on the hood, its great head and horns shattering the windshield. Ralph remembered the eyes. They were yellow like the headlights of an approaching car and angry. Perhaps he had hit a car, perhaps the pickup truck and somehow gotten ahead of him and had been blocking the road. He imagined Cletus Besserman reaching out to take Bobby from them.

"You're okay, sir." Ralph stared into the pimply face of an ambulance attendant. He was not confused. He remembered what had happened. They had been in an accident.

"We're going to get you into Redemption, to the hospital."

A rainbow of harsh lights lit up the accident scene. Some flashed on-&-off like the neon beer signs at Besserman's Gas & Grocery. Ralph was on a stretcher. He stared straight-up into the black night sky.

"They hit a buffalo," someone said.

"Got loose, wandered onto the highway," someone else said.

"Belongs to Charley Birdsong," the first voice said. "He raises them for meat."

"That damned Indian."

Ralph shuddered beneath the blanket. He strained against the belts that held him to the stretcher. He hadn't been alone in the car. They hadn't mentioned Jane or Bobby.

"My family," he said, "what about my wife and son?"

"She's okay," the attendant said. There was a pause. "Don't worry about the boy. He's in good hands, the best hands."

Ralph stared straight-up into the black night sky.

A raindrop splashed on his forehead. He had seen it coming, then another and another. They fell out of the black night into the garish dome of light.

Bobby was dead.

A clap of thunder was followed by a downpour. The icy-cold rain washed the blood from his face. Bobby was dead and it was raining.

"Next stop Redemption," someone said.

Ralph almost laughed at the irony of that.

The stretcher was lifted from the ground and slid into the ambulance.

Ralph heard the rain drumming on the roof.

He tried to block the sound out of his mind.

He clenched his teeth.

He prayed that Bobby was still alive, that Jane was still beautiful, that none of this was happening.

"There's been a drought for months, for years," the ambulance attendant said. The pimply-faced kid paused, getting himself comfortable next to Ralph. "Thank God for the rain."

Never Grow Up

John Gordon

There seems to exist some unwritten rule against including more than one story by any one author in an anthology (unless under the disguise of a pseudonym). This taboo has never been a problem with The Year's Best Horror Stories, inasmuch as a good writer may well publish several outstanding stories within a given year. In the past, Harlan Ellison, Ramsey Campbell, and Brian Lumley have each appeared twice in the same volume of The Year's Best Horror Stories. John Gordon has now joined that distinguished list of authors who have written two of the year's finest horror stories.

"Never Grow Up" is another story from Gordon's collection, Catch Your Death and Other Ghost Stories. By no means a children's book, the collection deserves recognition as a superior book of horror stories" ranging from "The Pot of Basil" (a story M. R. James would have been proud to have written) to the disquieting psychological horror of "Never Grow Up" (which would be quite at home in Charles L. Grant's noted Shadows series).

ME MUM IS VERY good looking. Everyone says so. 'Specially me dad. And it ain't just men, but men mainly. She love it when she see a man. I see her eyes go blacker when a man come along—it don't matter who he is or how old he is, or even if he's a kid like me, her eyes go *black black*—know what I mean?—with a kind of sparkle they're so deep black, and her mouth go squashy. It do. It used to go squashy for me when I was very little. Not now.

"You changed," she say to me one day. "You changed the instant you was thirteen."

"Well I can't help that, can I?" I say to her. "Everyone get older. Even you."

That had her. She didn't like that.

"Trouble with you is," she say, "you gone all bony and ugly, I see that

the instant you come to be thirteen. And another thing," she say, "you still got baby ways."

Just a minute, me nose is running. I can't stick it this close to the crack without it getting a dribble. Seems to steam up. Don't worry, I ain't going away. There's nobody coming to chase me away, and there ain't likely to be, not at this time of night. Not here.

I ain't afraid to be in a graveyard, Sarah Graham. Not with you. I told you I cleaned all the moss out of your name and them dates. Eighteen-eighty is a long time ago, Sarah, but you was only twelve when it happened so I suppose you ain't gone on from there in a way. You never did get to be thirteen and bloody ugly—anyway you wasn't a boy, so it was different for you.

It must be funny being buried. Especially if you're fairly posh. I mean you can't expect to die when you're a kid if you live in a big house an' all. That's why they put this big stone box thing over you, I expect, and the railings all round. They didn't like the idea of you being dead in the same way as other people. Won't happen to me. Wish it would. Me own little stone house. I should be the same as you. I'd get behind them cracks and listen.

I should think you was good looking, Sarah. Probably a blondie. Long hair and all that. I bet you died of consumption like the rest of 'em. But I don't expect you enjoyed it much. Sorry I spoke.

Me mum have black hair like her eyes and she do it different practically every day. Boring it is. She's always got her head over the sink, washing it. We got a bathroom but she use the sink because she needs the space. Then there's wrapping it up in towels and drying it, and combing it and looking at herself. Takes hours. And she goes on at *me* about being childish.

I got a train set, Sarah. I expect you know what a train is. You went in there a hundred years ago and I know you was only twelve but you must have seen trains. Mine's electric—it don't matter what that means because mine looks just the same as yours. Funnels and that, just like it was still steam, because I like it. I go back and back into the past when I run that. And that's not all. I go little. That's what she don't like, me lying on the floor and imagining I'm a right tiny little man and can climb up them little steps over the wheels and stand on that tin platform and feel it rocking under me feet.

"I don't know why I ever bothered to have you," she say. "Why don't you grow up?"

There ain't no need, Sarah Graham, is there? You never bothered

getting old and all that. Not that you had much choice, I expect. Me dad didn't either.

And he weren't really old. Not really. Thirty-three—just over twice your age. I seen that on the death certificate. You got one of them somewhere, Sarah. I ain't. Not yet. I should like to see mine; must be interesting. I suppose I could find yours in a museum or something and read it to you. But there ain't time; not now. I seen me dad's. Cause of death and all that. Couldn't understand it, but I know what it was.

I got to stand up for a minute. Me legs is stiff. But if I keep saying things I expect you'll hear because being dead is different. It's got to be, or else there ain't no point. I know you ain't come out yet, but I reckon you could see things out here I can't. All this long grass and them black trees, they're thick with things. Things standing there, thinner than paper. Curtains and curtains of 'em. You can feel them touch as you move.

Your mum and dad might be there, except they ain't buried here. That's a mystery to me, Sarah, when they spent so much money on stones for you. I reckon that's why I cleaned up your name, because you was by yourself. Me dad ain't here either. I don't now where he is.

Christ!

Oosh, that made me jump. Bloody old owl went by like a ball of black fluff. Couldn't hear the old sod till he was practically on me bloody shoulder.

Listen, Sarah, I'll put me breath through the crack and you'll hear. I don't want to say it. I don't. I don't.

I don't know where me dad is. They cremated him. Rose bush, that's all he's got. And his name on a sign stuck in the ground. He ain't got a place like you, Sarah, with moss and stuff. And he ain't where they put him. I can't find him. They should've scattered him on the reccey; on the football pitch. He weren't bad in goal. A bit slow, but big. I would've known where to go for him if they scattered him there. And I would've kept a little pinch of him and put him in me train.

I seen his certificate but nobody know what he really died of, except me. And her. She ought to. She done him in, Sarah. Nobody say it, but she done it.

Him and me used to get on the floor when I had me train running. We used to look at each other through the train wheels as it went by. We put our ears on the carpet and you could hear it rumble like it was huge and heavy.

We was doing it that day when she come in and seen us. I wasn't paying much attention to her, but I should've. First thing I noticed was her voice.

"Look what I married," she say. "Bloody great kid. Playing with his little train set."

That begun it. I never see a row to match that one. Me dad went mad. He jumped up and kicked me train over. Then he stamped on it. And he yelled at her.

"I don't give a bugger about train sets!" he said. "And I don't give a bugger about you!"

She didn't say nothing. Not for a long time. She just looked at him until all the glitter had gone out of her eyes, then she say, "I'm going out." She was all quiet like she had gone solid. It was only her face that was saying the words.

I didn't cry, Sarah. But I seen me dad cry. He was picking up me busted train and telling me he'd get a new one. He did an' all. Sometimes he fling his money about like he hate the stuff. He got me a new train. Just the same. And some new track and stuff. It was better than before, and he should've loved it but he never come down on the floor with me after that.

He sat and watched telly a lot, and she went out.

Me mum ain't a tart, Sarah. Jeff Black say that once and he was sorry he ever opened his mouth. I just about wiped him out. His face was one mass of blood when I finished with him—except I didn't finish. They pulled me off, else he'd be dead. Like me dad. I wish it was him instead of me dad.

Stone's getting wet again, Sarah. Got to wipe it, and me nose. Is it nice and dry in there? Must be, because there ain't no cracks in the top, just this one down the side. I bet it's peaceful. Well it is out here, I suppose, and the long grass is all right for lying down in. I could live here, Sarah. Well, stay here, anyway.

What was your parents like? Don't bother to tell me; it don't matter. I know what you was like with your blondie hair all spread out on the pillow when you was dying. They was watching you and crying like mad, I expect. And then the house all dark, and you in your coffin, and flowers. That's the one thing I can't stand about funerals, the flowers. The smell make you feel sick like it's wrapping up the dead person as if there was something wrong with him and they wanted to hide it.

Me dad's funeral was pretty quick when it happened. Nobody wanted to know about him once they'd all made their minds up what he done. They never knew about the tablets. That never come up. Hardly likely it would. They was *her* tablets.

She kept them in her handbag, didn't she, because she always say they was dangerous. So they was, but for a long time I never knew what was

going on. He was just getting drunk every night. He was all right when he got drunk, mostly. She used to like it because he chucked his money about more than ever. But sometimes she go hard and say that's why we live where we do because we ain't got nothing. But after they had that row she got to letting him get drunk on his own, and then instead of being happy down the pub he'd sit and watch the telly and when he was really drunk he start to cry. That's what I didn't like. He were too big to do that, but he done it.

I'm getting sleepy, Sarah, lying here, but I got to tell you.

I see him get the whiskey bottle out every time the front door bang and she were gone, and he sit in the same place and I knew what were coming. I got so used to it I used to yawn. But then I see something else. Every time she went out, them tablets was on the telly. That little brown bottle sat there by itself, and it should have been in her handbag.

Every morning it was gone, but every night it was there when the whiskey bottle come out and he was on his own. I kept watching it. I hardly dare leave the room. That little bottle were like a bomb; that were like a little brown man squatting there, or looking like it was crawling forward like in that story with a label round it saying "Eat me, eat me" every time he was sorry for hisself. And that was every time he got drunk.

I watched her. I never say nothing. She always put them tablets down on the telly like it were casual, and a couple of times I handed them back to her, and she say, "Thank you, I better not be so careless."

But then it kept turning up in different places, close to him, and I was frit. I searched and searched every time she went out and when I found it I hid it till she came home.

I felt sick, Sarah. I feel sick now. She knew what I was doing, and she knew I couldn't say nothing. Not to her. I couldn't talk to me mother about something like that, could I? She never done nothing like she was being wicked or anything. She never let on, but that little bottle was always there somewhere and I was getting ill looking for it.

And it was my fault, Sarah, what happened. I made a mistake. I got so worried that what I done one night was pinch that bottle from her handbag, and when she found out she come at me in front of him.

"You little devil," she say. "I know what you done." And she put out her hand, twitching her fingers. "Give it over."

I didn't do nothing.

Me dad say to her, "What you on about?"

She say, "He been pinching from my handbag, that's what."

She held out her hand, and me dad watched. He hate people who nick things, do my dad. He near killed me when I done something like that

once before. But I couldn't take out that bottle, not in front of him. That were what she wanted me to do. Draw attention to it, so he see it next time she put it out, and next time he was drunk and crying he'd get ideas. So you know what I done, Sarah? It were terrible.

I let myself down in front of him. I made out I was a thief. I had a quid in me pocket and I took it out and I handed it to her. I didn't see me dad because I couldn't look at him; I just stood there with the quid, holding it out, like it was something rotten and filthy and I done it.

"See?" she say to him. "See what a nasty ugly little devil you got for a son. What use was it ever having him when he pinch from his own mother? It's you what done it. Playing with him like a kid. Bloody train sets, that's all you're good for. Call yourself a man? Bloody kid that's what you are."

My dad's big; he have tattoos and all that on his arms. He have a fish that can punch a brick in two; I seen him do it. I ain't never seen a man get nasty with him, but she done it.

It was like her lips pushed her nose out of the way. She was all gob. "You ain't a man," she say. "Never have been. I never thought you was a proper man, never. King o' the kids, that's you. King o' the bleeding kids."

I thought he was going to hit her then, but he never. I see his face and it was like a kid's just then. He have short hair, and it stuck up all bristles like a boy who have just had a haircut. He busted my heart, Sarah, that's what he done. Because he didn't even look at me. He just turned round and walked out.

"Good riddance!" she yell, and he just went out quiet as a mouse.

I never see him again, Sarah. They wouldn't even let me look.

She had my quid. She put it in her handbag and shut it. I didn't care, because she'd forgotten about them pills.

Sorry, Sarah, I just can't help laughing. She took my quid and on top of that she didn't have no need of them pills no more; not for him—they done their work and he never even seen them.

They done their work all right, and now they're doing it again. I never gave them back to her. She'll never get 'em now, because that's what I been scrunching while I been talking to you, Sarah. But you know that, because you been through it, and see what's happening to me. I reckon it's time you come out to fetch me, Sarah, while I'm looking up at the stars.

I still can't help laughing. I worried all the time about them pills and

me dad, but he never needed them. They found him on the allotments. In a shed. He used a bit of old rope, did my dad. He never had need of pills.

Deadlights

Charles Wagner

Charles Wagner is one of the students who have had the good fortune to take Dennis Etchison's creative writing class at U.C.L.A. Perhaps there's something to the idea that horror writers take delight in helping along new horror writers—much the same as vampires are always looking out for fresh blood.

Of himself, Wagner writes: "I was born December 8, 1957 in Beloit, Kansas, where I lived until finishing high school. For reasons that have become vague, I studied electrical engineering at the University of Kansas, receiving my degree in 1979. Quickly tiring of work in the field, I took writing classes in my spare time, finally moving to Los Angeles in 1982 where I began writing in earnest. It was with Dennis Etchison's help that my work began to pay off, and it was in his class that I met my wife, Margaret Coleman, who also writes. Presently my goal is to leave engineering forever. 'Deadlights' is my first published work and I am pleased that it was chosen to appear here—and no, the editor of this anthology is not my uncle."

"Deadlights" first appeared in Twisted Tales, one of the independently produced comic books that today continue the E.C. horror tradition. Interestingly, the same issue also features an adaptation of Etchison's story, "Wet Season." I think this is the first time that a prose version of a story from a comic book has appeared in an anthology.

ON U.S. 24 BETWEEN Glasco and Beloit in Kansas, driving at night can be hazardous. Not all the headlights that follow you on that lonely, seventeen-mile stretch of road have cars connected to them.

Perhaps I should explain. Go back a few years.

It was late, around midnight. Bob, Dean, and I were heading back home to Beloit in Bob's Dodge Challenger. It was a fast car, so we usually took it. Dean's car wasn't exactly slow, but he kept messing it up and it

was in the garage now with a carburetor problem and wouldn't be ready till morning.

I never teased Dean much about his Mustang because it was better than what I had, which was nothing. Like his car, Dean himself often had problems.

At the time, Dean's primary problem was with Lori, his girlfriend of the last few months. Dean was talking really big about what a bitch she was but Bob and I knew that if he punted her, he could be in for a long dry spell.

That night, she had punted him.

Dean sat in back on the way home, pouting. Usually I sat in back, being the shortest of us, but tonight Dean wanted to sulk, so Bob—all 6'3" of him—encouraged Dean to sit in the back and let me ride up front.

The whole business of Glasco was a little silly. Bob's cousin Valery lived there and we figured she was an 'in' to all the Glasco girls. Of course, Glasco was half the size of Beloit so "all the Glasco girls" didn't really come to a lot.

We usually did all right, though. Especially Bob, because of his height and looks. Tonight, however, Dean's fight with Lori had dominated affairs.

We were quiet. A Led Zeppelin tape dangled from the eight-track but we were tired of it, and not feeling particularly rowdy, so we left it off. The only sounds were the rush of air and Bob's engine. It was warm so we had both front windows open. Wheat fields and milo cane went by in the dark flanking U.S. 24.

We had set a personal record after school that Friday: Running Le Mans-style to the car and driving like hell, we made it to Glasco in eleven minutes from the sound of the school bell. Our best time in four years of Glasco runs. It being April of our senior year (75 was our year and the number in our class), few opportunities remained to equal or surpass it.

Late that night, the legal limit was all the faster we felt like going.

"Shit!"

Dean was grumbling in the back seat, but Bob and I didn't pay any attention to him as he was probably still upset about Lori.

"Oh shit."

This time he sounded more worried than anything else.

I looked at Bob and he sighed audibly. "What is it, Dean?" Neither of us even glanced back at him.

"He's back."

"Who's back?" I asked.

"The lights."

"You mean there's a car behind us?" Bob said, trying to coax information out of him.

"No car—just headlights." Dean's voice was quiet with resolve.

Bob and I sneered at each other. I looked back.

There were a pair of headlights—bright beams—far, far behind us on 24. A month ago, Dean had told us a story about being followed by headlights that had no car making them. It was a story a couple of others around town had mumbled, most of those, drunk kids trying to explain away why they were out late by switching the subject to ghostly headlights. Like a lot of things Dead said, we took it with a grain of salt. (Dean is a good guy but he has that tendency to exaggerate.)

I squinted hard and saw only headlights, which was normal for that distance in the dark. Kansas is pretty flat and you can usually see for miles in open country.

"Okay, there's headlights back there," I reported.

I shrugged at Bob and he gave a mild head-shake. Dean was hunched into the Naugahyde, peering over the seat at the lights, as if they could detect him at that distance.

The headlights began to gain on us.

Bob pushed in the Led Zeppelin tape. "Communication Breakdown" poured out of the speakers. I flinched and lowered the volume on the tape deck.

"Look," Dean said. He was frozen in position, staring out the back window.

The headlights were really coming on now. Still on bright beam, they glanced off the rear view mirror into Bob's eyes.

"I wish he'd dim those things," Bob muttered.

"He never does," Dean placidly said.

"Is the driver a he?" I asked.

Dean shrugged. "There isn't any driver that you can see, I just say that."

By now, the headlights had drawn very near, making the cabin of Bob's Challenger almost as bright as day. Dean seemed to be trying to merge with the car seat. Bob motioned outside the window with his hand, waving the car past, but the lights stayed glued to our fender. I couldn't see any car, but then, the light was awfully bright.

The car, or whatever it was, didn't pass us. I began making half-peace-sign gestures at the lights with my hand. Bob maintained his speed, muttering "asshole" under his breath. "—communication breakdown, it's always the saaammmeeee—" rattled the speakers.

"Another minute . . ." Dean said.

My eyes adjusted to the glare a little bit and I still couldn't see a car. The old highway 41 turnoff drew near.

"About now . . ." Dean said, his voice softly patient.

The headlights eased off our tail, slowing to a near halt. They made the turn onto old 41. I tried to see what kind of car was behind them but my eyes were adjusted to light too much to permit me to see anything other than the headlights swerving and Dean looking at me for some kind of confirmation.

"Well?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," was all I could say.

"I was busy driving," Bob said, pulling the tape out and sounding as apologetic as he could.

When we dropped Dean off at his house, he was still pissed at us.

Bob came over to my place that Saturday for a game of horse. We always played horse or one-on-one, but I preferred horse since I was short and had never won at the other. We were shooting the ball well that day with our shirts off and hanging from the trellis that marked the court's east boundary. Winter-pale, we were hoping to start our tans. The score was "ho" to "ho."

Dean's car swung into the drive and pulled up to the west side of the court. Dean stepped out with flourish, the perennial Banner Drive-Inn glass of Coke in his hand. (I swear, the guy drank more pop than a little-league team.) We expected him to whip off his shirt and join the game.

Instead, he sauntered coolly over to the trellis and sucked on his Coke. "Guess what I heard," he said, staring into the cup.

I held the ball to my hip and waited.

"Well?" Bob said.

Dean pulled off the lid and stirred the ice with his straw. "Sumthin about those headlights . . ."

"Yeah," I said. "Whad'ya hear?"

Dean cocked the cup to his mouth and tapped some ice in. "Some guy got killed in a wreck twenty years ago," he said, his words slurpy with ice, "out by the old 41 turnoff. My dad told me about it."

I won't repeat Dean's version of the tale. Since that Saturday, I've studied the incident and what follows is my version of what the papers reported:

There was a guy named Bill Phillips. His friends had called him "Tank" because he was built like a fire-plug, was strong, and had played fullback in school. He was a mechanic and a 1953 BHS grad. He had been driving

back from Glasco in a big hurry and apparently tried to turn on to old 41. He was going too fast and rolled his Merc. His neck was broken. That was in May of 1955.

That was all the papers told me, but I did some talking around and learned more. It was Bob's aunt—Valery's mom—that gave me most of the real story behind that odd wreck.

She said that Tank had been dating her best friend, Becky Hunter. Both girls lived in Glasco, so Tank did a lot of commuting between Beloit and Glasco, much as we did. Tank had been dating Becky for four years and he was working up to a proposal that Becky probably would've rejected, or so Bob's aunt believed.

She said Becky liked Tank all right, but she really wanted to go on to college and get a degree. Usually when a girl leaves Glasco—or Beloit, for that matter—for college, she meets a lot of new people. Most never come back, except for visits. And Tank was the kind of guy who wanted to settle down in Beloit.

Well anyway, Tank never got a chance to propose. He went to Glasco that May evening to see Becky but Bob's aunt told him she had already gone out. Hopping mad, Tank tore off in his Merc, hoping, probably, to overtake Becky and her date. Since Glasco didn't have a movie house, he figured they'd head for Beloit.

When Bob's aunt reached this part, it was pretty obvious to guess the rest. Driving hard at night, Tank undoubtedly wanted to get to Beloit before the show let out so he could catch the new guy and Becky before they got to their car. But when he got near the old 41 turnoff, another thought probably occurred to him.

Even in 1955, 41 was a vintage strip of road. Made in the '20s, it was a narrow piece of old, cracked concrete that ran north-south for thirty miles. It wasn't very well traveled but its shallow ditches made for excellent parking.

The thought that maybe, just maybe, Becky and this new guy were parking on old 41 got to Tank so hard, he didn't know which way to go. So he ended up going nowhere.

If you believe in ghosts, it's not hard to imagine Tank's ghost tearing up U.S. 24 looking for Becky. He'd keep his brights on so he could peer inside cars to see if Becky was there. Then he'd complete the turn onto old 41.

That's a pretty stupid notion.

Not many folks claim to have seen ghostly headlights on 24, and if they were for real, there wasn't much they could do to a person. Besides,

Becky Hunter Collins moved to New York back in 1960 and Bob's aunt assured me that it wasn't fear of headlights that made the move so attractive to her.

But in 1975, the newspaper story was all Bob, Dean, and I knew about the whole affair. Bob and I remained convinced that Dean was exaggerating about the "mysterious" headlights, but we were intrigued nonetheless.

That Saturday evening, the three of us cruised Mill Street in Bob's Dodge before making the inevitable trip to Glasco. We had dates, except for Dean, but the prospect of encountering the lights again was stronger than any dim hope of sex.

We reached Glasco at sundown. Val joined us to keep Dean company.

The night was uneventful. We parked in a cemetery, hoping for some necking, but the girls weren't very scare-prone and easily avoided our attempts at "comfort." Disgusted, we took them home and left Glasco, but not before several hours had passed and four six-packs were downed.

On the way back, I was in my customary place in the back seat. Bachman-Turner Overdrive was singing at us to "stay awake all night" over the eight-track and the windows were down. Lounging drunkenly, I glanced out the back.

There were headlights to the rear.

I watched for half a mile until the headlights became a red pickup that took the first farm turnoff. I sat back and watched Beloit twinkle in the west.

"—stay awake, stay awake—" the tape deck throbbed.

Sitting in the back reminded me of the times I sat in the back of Dad's big Chrysler when we were coming back from trips to Topeka to see my uncle. I'd stretch out in the back but wouldn't sleep.

I never sleep in cars.

Peering out the window, I'd gaze as far as I could see over the land. On the horizon, sometimes, thunderheads would stand, lit like pink cauliflower by lightning.

Other times, it would appear that there were large, vague objects trundling along—like nebulous tumbleweeds or something—trying to keep pace with our car. They would move just outside the edge of sight, rolling and lurching along, but finally fall far behind. Others would be there to take up the chase until we got near town and the lights drove them away.

I knew they were illusions, like water on the road on a sunny day, but it was neat to imagine them chasing us.

Fortunately, we never had a flat or engine trouble.

Over the years, things didn't change all that much. When I got my restricted license, I began dreaming of a car of my own . . . but I remained stuck in back seats.

While reminiscing, I looked out the Challenger's side window into the darkness. I saw nothing strange—a farm light and a thunderhead far in the north. Lightning flashed inside the cloud. The color was blue like brains.

Light flashed suddenly in the compartment. I looked back to see two headlights on hi-beam coming over a low rise a mile back. They were gaining on us—fast.

Bachman-Turner switched songs. “Let it Ride” blared over the speakers.

I closed my eyes, trying to keep the pupils opened wide, and looked again.

There was no car visible behind the lights. Brightness became glare inside our car.

“Bob, Dean—he's here.” Dean looked back as Bob stayed fixed to the road.

“Shit, it's him,” Dean said. The headlights came right behind us like the night before. “—wouldja let it ride?” the tape deck asked.

“I don't see a car, fellas,” I dutifully reported.

“Fuck him!” Bob growled, stomping on the pedal. The Challenger roared and hit 70.

The headlights didn't fade an inch.

“I can't hear an engine on that thing!” I shouted, not really sure that I could've heard anything at all outside the car.

The headlights stayed mutely on our tail at 85 mph.

“C'mon, Bob!” Dean pleaded. “Why bother?”

“It's been a shit-night and I wanna lose this ghost!”

“What!?” I yelled as we went over 90. “—would you say good-bye, wouldja let it ride—” Randy Bachman shrieked over the speakers.

“May as well try!!” Bob shouted, letting it all out on the floorboards. The car roared up to 100 mph.

The headlights didn't waver. It was high-noon bright inside the Challenger.

The 41 turnoff loomed ahead.

“I'll take the turn and he'll follow!” Bob yelled.

“No!!” Dean wailed. He reached for the wheel. Bob turned to slap his hand away. “—ride, ride, ride, let it ride—” chanted the tape deck. I grabbed an armrest and dropped to the floor.

We skipped off the road and jumped the ditch at 90 mph. The

Challenger bucked hard into the cultivated earth and the tires blew out. Dirty milo cane churned into the car as I buffeted fetally on the floor, my arm cracking against the back seat as we ground to a dead halt in the milo field. Our headlights faintly lit the dead, brown stalks all around us. The tape had broken and FM hiss played softly in the car.

In the front seat, Bob and Dean remained, their heads imbedded in the dashboard.

Painfully, I turned my head and looked out, back through the swath we had made, and saw the headlights in the road. They had stopped, as if to allow their invisible driver to view the accident, and then started moving slowly forward. I watched them pass by, but they didn't turn on to old highway 41.

They just switched off.

There isn't much more to tell.

It's been four years since the wreck, and since then, I've gotten my college diploma and a car of my own. In a few weeks, I'll be moving to Wichita to start a new job, but for now, it feels good sitting comfy in Beloit.

I reckon while I'm here visiting the folks, I'll stop by Bob and Dean's graves and leave them some flowers. That might make them feel a little better.

Lately, the talk around town is that the headlights that follow you from Glasco are back. The few that have seen them say they're different: four beams now, instead of two. Like the hi-beams of a Dodge. I know the rumor is true because I've seen the headlights myself.

Come to think of it, I'd *better* put flowers on my friends' graves.

Last night, coming into town, they tried to run me off the road.

Talking in the Dark

Dennis Etchison

In the case of the frequent contributors to The Year's Best Horror Stories, it sometimes becomes a strain to write something new about them with each new introduction. Looking back over my own and previous editor Gerald W. Page's introductions to stories by Dennis Etchison, I note one pleasant change over the years: It is no longer accurate to describe Dennis Etchison as "unknown and unjustly neglected." It took a few years, but Etchison has now firmly established himself as one of the horror genre's premier authors.

Born in Stockton, California on March 30, 1943, Etchison now lives in Los Angeles, where he teaches creative writing at U.C.L.A. Most recently, he has been hired as story editor for "The Hitchhiker" horror/fantasy series on HBO. Etchison's books include film novelizations of The Fog, Halloween II, Halloween III, and Videodrome (the last three under the pseudonym Jack Martin); two short story collections, The Dark Country and Red Dreams, and a novel, Darkside. "Talking in the Dark" was first published in Charles L. Grant's Shadows 7. Any resemblance to actual horror fans or horror writers is unimaginable.

IN THE DAMP bedroom Victor Ripon sat hunched over his desk, making last-minute corrections on the ninth or tenth draft, he couldn't remember which, of a letter to the one person in the world who might be able to help. Outside, puppies with the voices of children struggled against their leashes for a chance to be let in from the cold. He ignored them and bore down. Their efforts at sympathy were wasted on him; he had nothing more to give. After thirty-three years he had finally stepped out of the melodrama.

He clicked the pen against his teeth. Since the letter was to a man he had never met, he had to be certain that his words would not seem naïve or foolish.

"Dear Sir," he reread, squinting down at the latest version's cramped,

meticulously cursive backhand. He lifted the three-hole notebook paper by the edges so as not to risk smearing the ballpoint ink. "Dear Sir . . ."

First let me say that I sincerely hope this letter reaches you. I do not have your home address so I have taken the liberty of writing in care of your publisher. If they forward it to you please let me know.

I am not in the habit of writing to authors. This is the first time. So please bear with me if my letter is not perfect in spelling, etc.

I have been reading your Works for approximately 6 yrs., in other words since shortly after I was married but more about that later. Mr. Christian, Rex if I may call you that and I feel I can, you are my favorite author and greatest fan. Some people say you are too morbid and depressing but I disagree. You do not write for children or women with weak hearts (I am guessing) but in your books people always get what they deserve. No other author I have read teaches this so well. I can see why you are one of the most popular authors in the world. I have all 6 of your books, I hope there are only 6, I wouldn't like to think I missed any! (If so could you send me a list of the titles and where I might obtain them? A S.A.S.E is enclosed for your convenience. Thank you.)

My favorite is *THE SILVERING*, I found that to be a very excellent plot, to tell the truth it scared the shit out of me if you know what I mean and I think you do, right? (Wink wink.) *MOON OVER THE NEST* is right up there, too. My wife introduced me to your novels, my ex-wife I should say and I guess I should thank her for that much. She left me 2 1/2 yrs. ago, took the kids to San Diego first and then to Salt Lake City I found out later. I don't know why, she didn't say. I have tried to track her down but no luck. Twice with my late parents' help I found out where she was staying but too late. So that is the way she wants it, I guess. I miss the kids though, my little boy especially.

In your next book, *THE EDGE*, I noticed you made one small mistake, I hope you don't mind my pointing it out. In that one you have Moreham killing his old girlfriend by electrocution (before he does other things to her!) while she is setting up their word processor link. Excuse me but this is wrong. I know this because I was employed in the Computer Field after dropping out of Pre-Med to support my family. The current utilized by a Mark IIIA terminal is not enough to produce a lethal shock, even if the interface circuits were wired in sequence as you describe (which is impossible anyway, sorry, just thought you might like to know). Also the .066 nanosecond figure should be corrected

And so on in a similar vein. Victor worked his way through three more

densely packed pages of commentary and helpful advice regarding Rex Christian's other bestsellers, including *Jesus Had A Son*, *The Masked Moon*, and the collection of short stories, *Nightmare Territory*, before returning to more personal matters.

If you ever find yourself in my neck of the woods please feel free to drop by. We could have a few beers and sit up talking about the many things we have in common. Like our love of old movies. I can tell you feel the same way about such "classics" (?) as *ROBOT INVADERS*, *MARS VS. EARTH* and *HOUSE OF BLOOD* from the way you wrote about them in your series of articles for *TV GUIDE*. I subscribed so I wouldn't miss a single installment. There are others we could talk about, even watch if we're lucky. I get Channel 56 here in Gezira, you may have heard about it, they show old chestnuts of that persuasion all night long!!

If you have not guessed by now, I too try my hand at writing occasionally myself. I have been working for the past 1 1/2 yrs. on a story entitled *PLEASE, PLEASE, SORRY, THANK YOU*. It will be a very important story, I believe. Don't worry, I'm not going to ask you to read it. (You are probably too busy, anyway.) Besides, I read *WRITER'S DIGEST* so I know where to send it if and when I succeed in bringing it to a satisfactory stage of completion. But you are my inspiration. Without you I would not have the courage to go on with it at all.

He hesitated before the conclusion, as he had when first drafting it four nights ago. On the other side of the window pane the sky was already smoking over with a fine mist, turning rapidly from the color of arterial blood to a dead slate gray. The sea rushed and drubbed at the coastline a mile to the west, shaking and steadily eroding the bedrock upon which his town was built; the vibrations which reached the glass membrane next to him were like the rhythms of a buried human heart.

There is one more thing. I have a very important question to ask you, I hope you don't mind. It is a simple thing (to you) and I'm sure you could answer it. You might say I should ask someone else but the truth is I don't know anyone else who could help. What I know isn't enough. I thought it would be but it isn't. It seems to me that the things we learned up until now, the really important things, and I can tell we've had many of the same experiences (the Sixties, etc.), when it came time to live them, the system balked. And we're dying. But don't worry, I'm a fighter. I learned a long time ago: never give up.

I live in my parents' old house now, so we could have plenty of privacy.

In my opinion we could help each other very much. My number is 474-2841. If I'm not here I'll be at the Blue & White (corner of Rosetta and Damietta), that is where I work, anybody can tell you where to find it. I hope to hear from you at your earliest convenience.

Meanwhile I'm waiting with bated breath for your book of essays, *OTHER CEDENTS*, they mentioned it on *Wake Up, America* and I can hardly wait! If you care to let me read the manuscript prior to publication I promise to return it by Express Mail in perfect condition. (Just asking, hint hint.) In any event please come by for a visit on your next trip to the West Coast. I hope you will take me up on it sometime (soon!), I really need the answer. We Horror Fans have to stick together. As you said in your Introduction to *NIGHTMARE TERRITORY*, "It may be a long time till morning, but there's no law against talking in the dark."

Faithfully Yours,
Victor Ripon

He sat back. He breathed in, out. It was the first breath he had been aware of taking for several minutes. The view from the window was no longer clear. A blanket of fog had descended to shroud all evidence of life outside his room. The puppies next door had quieted, resigned to their fate. Still, a hopeful smile played at the corners of his mouth. He stacked and folded the pages to fit the already stamped envelope. There. Now there wasn't anything to do but wait.

He stretched expansively, hearing his joints pop like dry bones, and his fingernails touched the window. So early, and yet the glass was chillingly brittle, ready to shatter under the slightest provocation.

With any luck he wouldn't have long to wait at all.

The days shrank as the season contracted, drawing inward against the approaching winter. Trees bared stiffening limbs, scraped the sky and etched patterns of stars as sharp and cold as diamond dust above the horizon. Victor got out his old Army jacket. The main house became dank and tomblike, magnifying the creaking of dry-rotted timbers. He took to sleeping in the guest cabin, though the portable heater kept him tight and shivering night after night.

He pressed bravely ahead with his story, the outlines and preliminary versions of which by now filled two thick notebooks, reorganizing, redrafting, and obsessively repolishing lines and paragraphs with a jeweler's precision.

But it was not good enough.

He wanted the pages to sing with ideas that had once seemed so

important to him, all and everything he knew, and yet they did not, and no amount of diligence was able to bring them to life. The story came to be a burden and weighed more heavily in his hands each time he lifted it out of the drawer. After a few weeks he was reluctant to open the desk at all.

He stayed in bed more but slept less, dragging himself up for work each day only at the last possible minute. Nothing except Rex Christian's books held any interest for him now, and he had read them all so many times he believed he knew them by heart, almost as well as his own stillborn effort. Channel 56 exhausted its library of late-night movies and sold out to a fundamentalist religious sect peddling fire and brimstone. The nights lengthened and the long winter closed around him.

Each day, he thought, I die a little. I must. I get out of bed, don't I?

Mornings, he walked the two miles along the creek into town, reexamining the last few years like beads to be memorized in his pocketed fists before they slipped away forever. He walked faster, but his life only seemed to recede that much more swiftly across the dunes and back to the sea. He could neither hold on to nor completely forget how things had once been. Whether or not they had ever truly been the way he remembered them was not the point. The spell of the past, his past, real or imagined, had settled over him like the shadow of giant wings, and he could not escape.

He submerged himself in his work at the shop, a space he rented for small appliance repair behind the Blue & White Diner, but that was not enough, either. For a time he tried to tell himself that nothing else mattered. But it was an evasion. You can run, he thought, but you can't hide. Rex Christian had taught him that.

Some days he would have traded anything he owned and all that he had ever earned to wake up one more time with the special smell of her on his pillow—just that, no matter whether he ever actually set eyes on her again. Other days his old revenge fantasies got the better of him. But all that was real for him now was the numbness of more and more hours at the shop, struggling to penetrate the inner workings of what others paid him to fix, the broken remnants of households which had fallen apart suddenly, without warning or explanation.

When not busy at work, the smallest of rewards kept him going. The weekly changes of program at the local movie theater, diverting but instantly forgettable; the specialties of the house at the Blue & White, prepared for him by the new waitress, whose name turned out to be Jolene; and Jolene herself when business was slow and there was nowhere else to go. She catered to him without complaint, serving

something, perhaps, behind his eyes that he thought he had put to rest long ago. He was grateful to her for being there. But he could not repay her in kind. He did not feel it, could not even if he had wanted to.

By late December he had almost given up hope.

The weekends were the worst. He had to get out, buttoned against the cold, though the coffee in town was never hot enough and the talk after the movies was mindless and did not nourish. But he could bear the big house no longer, and even the guest cabin had begun to enclose him like a vault.

This Saturday night, the last week before Christmas, the going was painfully slow. Steam expanded from his mouth like ectoplasm. He turned up his collar against an icy offshore wind. There were sand devils in the road, a halo around the ghost of a moon which hung over his shoulder and paced him relentlessly. At his side, to the north, dark reeds rustled and scratched the old riverbank with a sound of rusted blades. He stuffed his hands deeper into his jacket and trudged on toward the impersonal glow of the business district.

The neon above the Blue & White burned coolly in the darkness.

The nightlife in Gezira, such as it was—Siamese silhouettes of couples cruising for burgers, clutches of frantic teenagers on their way to or from the mall—appeared undiscouraged by the old. If anything, the pedestrians scissoring by seemed less inhibited than ever, pumping reserves of adrenaline and huffing wraiths of steam as if their last-minute shopping mattered more than anything else in this world. The bubble machine atop a police car revolved like a deranged Christmas tree light. Children giggled obscenities and fled as a firecracker resounded between lamp-posts; it might have been a gunshot. The patrol car spun out, burning rubber, and screeched past in the wrong direction.

He took a breath, opened the door to the diner and ducked inside.

The interior was clean and bright as a hospital cafeteria. A solitary pensioner dawdled at the end of the counter, spilling coffee as he cradled a cup in both hands. Twin milkshake glasses, both empty, balanced near the edge. As Victor entered, jangling the bell, the waitress glanced up. She saw him and beamed.

“Hi!”

“Hi, yourself.”

“I’ll be a few more minutes. Do you mind? The night girl just called. She’s gonna be late.” Jolene watched him as she cleaned off the tables, trying to read his face as if it were the first page of a test. Her eyes flicked nervously between his.

"Take your time," he said. He drew off his gloves and shuffled up to the counter. "No hurry."

"The movie—?"

"We won't miss anything."

She blinked at him. "But I thought the last show—"

"It starts," he said, "when we get there."

"Oh." She finished the tables, clearing away the remains of what other people could not finish. "I see," she said. "Are—are you all right?"

"Yes."

"Well, you don't sound like it." She looked at him as if she wanted to smooth his hair, take his temperature, enfold him in her big arms and stroke his head. Instead, she wiped her hands and tilted her face quizzically, keeping her distance. "How about something to eat?"

"Just coffee," he said. "My stomach's . . ." He sought the precise word; it eluded him. He gave up. "It's not right."

"Again?"

"Again." He tried a smile. It came out wrong. "Sorry. Maybe next time."

She considered the plate which she had been keeping warm on the grill. It contained a huge portion of fried shrimp, his favorite. She sighed.

The door jingled and a tall man came in. He was dressed like a logger or survivalist from up north, with plaid shirt, hiking boots, full beard, and long hair. Victor decided he had never seen him before, though something about the man was vaguely familiar.

Jolene dealt out another setup of flatware. He didn't need a menu. He knew what he wanted.

Victor considered the man, remembering the sixties. That could be me, he thought; I could have gone that way, too, if I had had the courage. And look at him. He's better off. He doesn't have any attachments to shake. He opted out a long time ago, and now there's nothing to pull him down.

Jolene set the man's order to cooking and returned to Victor.

"It won't be long," she said. "I promise." She gestured at the old Zenith portable next to the cash register. "You want the TV on?"

She needed to do something for him, Victor realized. She *needed* to. "Sure," he said agreeably. "Why not?"

She flicked a knob.

The nightly episode of a new religious game show. "You Think That's Heavy?" was in progress. In each segment a downtrodden soul from the audience was brought onstage and led up a ramp through a series of possible solutions, including a mock employment bureau, a bank loan office, a dating service, a psychiatric clinic and, finally, when all else had

failed, a preacher with shiny cheeks and an unnatural preoccupation with hair. Invariably, this last station of the journey was the one that took. Just now a poor woman with three children and a husband who could not support them was sobbing her way to the top of the hill.

I hope to God she finds what she needs, Victor thought absently. She looks like she deserves it. Of course, you can't tell. They're awfully good at getting sympathy . . .

But someone will come down and set things right for her, sooner or later. She'll get what she deserves, and it will be right as rain. I believe that.

But what about the kids? They're the ones I'm worried about . . .

At that moment the door to the diner rang open and several small children charged in, fresh from a spree on the mall, clutching a few cheap toys and a bag of McDonald's french fries. They spotted the big man in the red plaid shirt and ran to him, all stumbles and hugs. The man winked at Jolene, shrugged, and relocated to a corner booth.

"Whatdaya gonna do?" he said helplessly. "I reckon I gotta feed 'em, right?"

"I'll get the children's menus," said Jolene.

"You got any chili dogs?" said the man. "We came a long way. Don't have a whole lot left to spend. Is that okay?"

"Give them the shrimp," suggested Victor. "I can't handle it."

Jolene winked back. "I think we can come up with something," she said.

The pensioner observed the children warily. Who could say what they might have brought in with them? He obviously did not want to find out. His hands shook, spilling more coffee. It ran between his fingers as if his palms had begun to bleed.

Well, thought Victor, maybe I was wrong. Look at the big guy now. He can't run away from it either. But it could be he doesn't want to. He's got them, and they'll stick by him no matter what. Lucky, I guess. What's his secret?

Out on the sidewalk passersby hurried on their way, a look of expectation and dread glazing their eyes. Victor picked up his coffee. It was almost hot enough to taste.

There was another burst of ringing.

He braced himself, not knowing what to expect. He scanned the doorway.

But this time it was not a customer. It was the telephone.

Jolene reached across the counter, pushing dirty dishes out of the way. One of the milkshake glasses teetered and smashed to the floor. At the

end of the counter, the pensioner jumped as though the spirit of Christmas past had just lain its withered fingers to the back of his neck.

"What?" Jolene balanced the receiver. "I'm sorry, there's so much—yes. I said yes. Hold on." She passed the phone to Victor. "It's for you," she said.

"It is?"

"Sure is," she said. "I can't tell if it's a—"

"Yes?"

"Victor?"

"Yeah?"

"Vic!" said the reedy voice on the line. "Great to get ahold of you, finally! This is Rex. Rex Christian!"

"Really?" said Victor, stunned.

"Yup. Look, I'll be passing through your town in about, oh, say an hour. I was just wondering. Are you free tonight, by any chance?"

"Uh, sure, Re—"

"Don't say my name!"

"Okay," said Victor.

"I'm on my way from a meeting in San Francisco. Traveling incognito, you might say. You don't know how people can be if the word gets out. So I'd appreciate it if, you know, you don't let on who you're talking to. Understand?"

"I understand." It must be hard, he thought, being a celebrity.

"I knew you would."

Victor cupped his hand around the mouthpiece. The old man from the end of the counter fumbled money from his coin purse and staggered out. Victor tried to say the right things. He wasn't ready. However, he remembered how to get to his own house. He gave directions from Highway 1, speaking as clearly and calmly as he could.

"Who was that?" asked Jolene when he had hung up.

"Nobody," said Victor.

"What?"

"A friend, I mean. He . . ."

"He what?"

"I've got to . . . meet him. I forgot."

Her expression, held together until now by nervous anticipation, wilted before his eyes. The tension left her; her posture sagged. Suddenly, she looked older, overweight, lumpen. He did not know what to say.

He grabbed his gloves and made ready to leave.

She smoothed her apron, head down, hiding a tic, and then made a

great effort to face him. The smile was right but the lines were deeper than ever before.

"Call me?" she said. "If you want to. It's up to you. I don't care."

"Jolene . . ."

"No, really! I couldn't take the cold tonight, anyway. I—I hope you have a nice meeting. I can tell it's important."

"Business," he said. "You know."

"I know."

"I'm sorry."

She forced a laugh. "What on earth for? Don't you worry."

He nodded, embarrassed.

"Take care of yourself," she said.

You deserve better, he thought, than me, Jolene.

"You, too," he said. "I didn't plan it this way. Please believe—"

"I believe you. Now get going or you'll be late."

He felt relieved. He felt awful. He felt woefully unprepared. But at least he felt something.

All the way home the hidden river ran at his side, muffled by the reeds but no longer distant. This time he noticed that there were secret voices in the waters, talking to themselves and to each other, to the night with the tongues of wild children on their way back to the sea.

Now he considered the possibility that they might be talking to him.

Victor unlocked the old house and fired up the heater. He had little chance to clean. By the time he heard the car, he was covered with a cold sweat, and his stomach, which he had neglected to feed, constricted in a hopeless panic.

He parted the bathroom curtains.

The car below was long and sleek. A limousine? No, but it was a late-model sedan, a full-size Detroit tank with foglights.

A man climbed out, lugging a briefcase, and made for the front of the house.

Victor ran downstairs and flung open the door.

He saw a child approaching in the moonlight. It was the same person he had seen leave the shadow of the car. From the upstairs window the figure had appeared deceptively foreshortened.

The boy came into the circle of the porch light, sticking his chin out and grinning rows of pearly teeth.

"Vic?"

Victor was confused.

Then he saw.

It was not a child, after all.

"I'm Rex Christian," said the dwarf, extending a stubby hand. "Glad to meet you!"

The hand felt cold and compressed as a rubber ball in Victor's grip. He released it with an involuntary shudder. He cleared his throat.

"Come on in. I—I've been expecting you."

The visitor wobbled to an overstuffed chair and bounced up onto the cushion. His round-toed shoes jutted out in front of him.

"So! This is where one of my biggest fans lives!"

"I guess so," said Victor. "This is it."

"Great! It's perfect!"

On the stained wall a grandfather clock sliced at the thick air.

"Can I get you something?" Victor's own voice sounded hollow in his ears. "Like something to drink?"

"I'd settle for a beer. Just one, though. I want to keep a clear head."

Beer, thought Victor. Let me see . . . He couldn't think. He looked away. The small face and the monkey mouth were too much for him. He wanted to laugh and cry at the same time.

"You owe me, remember?"

"What?"

"The beer. In your letter you said—"

"Oh. Oh, yeah. Just a minute."

Victor went to the kitchen. By the time he returned, he had replayed his visitor's words in his mind until he recognized the rhythm. Everything the dwarf—midget, whatever he was—had said so far fit the style. There was no doubt about it. For better or worse, the person in the other room was in fact Rex Christian. The enormity of the occasion finally hit him. Setting the bottles on the coffee table between them, he almost knocked one over.

My time has come, he thought. My problems are about to be over. My prayers have been answered.

"This must be pretty far out of the way for you," Victor said.

"Not at all! Thanks for the invitation."

"Yeah," said Victor. "I mean, no. I mean . . ."

And in that instant he saw himself, this house, his life as it really was for the first time. He was overwhelmed with self-consciousness and shame.

"Did . . . did you have any trouble finding the place?"

"Nope. Followed your directions. Perfect!"

Victor studied the virgules in the carpet, trying to find his next words there.

Rex Christian leaned forward in his chair. The effort nearly doubled him over.

"Look, I know what it's like for you."

"You do?"

"Believe me, I do. That's my business, isn't it? I've seen it all before."

Rex sat back and took a long pull from the tall bottle. His Adam's apple rolled like a ball bearing in his throat.

"You must know a lot about people," said Victor.

"Never enough. That's why I take a trip like this at least once a year." He chortled. "I rent a car, visit folks like you all over the country. It's a way of paying them back. Plus it helps me with my research."

"I see." There was an awkward pause. "You—you said you were in San Francisco. On business. Was that part of this year's trip?"

"Right. Nothing beats the old one-on-one, does it?"

So he didn't come all this way just to see me, thought Victor. There were others. "From your writing, well, I thought you'd be a very private person."

"I am! Somebody wants a book, they have to climb the mountain. But when it comes to my fans, it's a different story. They're raw material. I go to the source, know what I mean?"

"I used to be a people-person," said Victor, loosening up a bit. He drained his bottle. He thought of going for two more. But the writer had hardly touched his. "Now, well, I don't go out much. I guess you could say I've turned into more of a project-type person."

"Glad to hear it!"

"You are?"

"It just so happens I've got a project you might be interested in. A new book. It's called *A Long Time Till Morning*."

"I like the title," said Victor. "Excuse me."

He rose unsteadily and made a beeline for the stairs. The beer had gone through his system in record time. When he came out of the bathroom, he gazed down in wonderment from the top of the landing. Rex Christian was still sitting there, stiff and proper as a ventriloquist's dummy. I can't believe this is happening, he thought. Now everything's changed. There he is, sitting in my living room!

His heart pounded with exhilaration.

Let me never forget this. Every minute, every second, every detail. I don't want to miss a thing. This is important; this matters. The most important night of my life.

He bounded down the stairs and snagged two more beers and an opener from the kitchen, then reseated himself on the sofa.

Rex Christian greeted him with a sparkling grin.

"Tell me about your new book," said Victor breathlessly. "I want to hear everything. I guess I'll be the first, won't I?"

"One of the first." The author folded his tiny hands. "It's about an epidemic that's sweeping the country—I don't have the details yet. I'm still roughing it out. All I gave my editor was a two-page outline."

"And he bought it?"

Rex Christian grinned.

"What kind of epidemic?"

"That's where you can help, Vic."

"If it's research you want, well, just tell me what you need. I used to do a lot of that in school. I was in premed and—"

"I want to make this as easy as possible for you."

"I know. I mean, I'm sure you do. But it's no sweat. I'll collect the data, Xerox articles, send you copies of everything that's ever been written on the subject, as soon as you tell me. . . ."

Rex Christian frowned, his face wrinkling like a deflating balloon. "I'm afraid that would involve too many legalities. Copyrights, fees, that sort of thing. Sources that might be traced."

"We could get permission, couldn't we? You wouldn't have to pay me. It would be an honor to—"

"I know." Rex Christian's miniature fingers flexed impatiently. "But that's the long way around, my friend."

"However you want to do it. Say the word and I'll get started, first thing in the morning. Monday morning. Tomorrow's Sunday and—"

"Monday's too late. It starts now. In fact, it's already started. You didn't know that, did you?" Rex's face flushed eagerly, his cheeks red as a newborn infant's. "I want to know *your* feelings on the subject. All of them." He pumped his legs and crept forward on the cushion. "Open yourself up. It won't hurt. I promise."

Victor's eyes stung and his throat ached. *It starts here*, he thought, awestruck. The last thirty-three years were the introduction to my life. Now it really starts.

"You wouldn't want to know my feelings," he said. "They—I've been pretty mixed up. For a long time."

"I don't care about what you felt before. I want to know what you feel tonight. It's only *you*, Vic. You're perfect. I can't get that in any library. Do you know how valuable you are to me?"

"But why? Your characters, they're so much more real, more alive. . . ."

Rex waved his words aside. "An illusion. Art isn't life, you know. If it were, the world would be up in flames. It's artifice. By definition." He slid

closer, his toes finally dropping below the coffee table. "Though naturally I try to make it echo real life as closely as I can. That's what turns my readers on. That's part of my mission. Don't you understand?"

Victor's eyes filled with tears.

Other people, the people he saw and heard on the screen, on TV, in books and magazines, voices on the telephone, all had lives which were so much more vital than his own wretched existence. The closest he had ever come to peak experiences, the moments he found himself returning to again and again in his memory, added up to nothing more significant than chance meetings on the road, like the time he hitchhiked to San Francisco in the summer of '67, a party in college where no one knew his name, the face of a girl in the window of a passing bus that he had never been able to forget.

And now?

He lowered his head to his knees and wept.

And in a blinding flash, as if the scales had been lifted from his eyes, he knew that nothing would ever be the same for him again. The time to hesitate was over. The time had come at last to make it real.

He thought: I am entitled to a place on the planet, after all.

He lifted his eyes to the light.

The dwarf's face was inches away. The diminutive features, the taut lips, the narrow brow, the close, lidded eyes, wise and all-forgiving. The sweet scent of an unknown after-shave lotion wafted from his skin.

"The past doesn't matter," said the dwarf. He placed the short fingers of one hand on Victor's head. "To hell with it all."

"Yes," said Victor. For so long he had thought just the opposite. But now he saw a way out. "Oh, yes."

"Tell me what you feel from this moment on," said the dwarf. "I need to know."

"I don't know how," said Victor.

"Try."

Victor stared into the dark, polished eyes, shiny as a doll's eyes.

"I want to. I—I don't know if I can."

"Of course you can. We're alone now. You didn't tell anyone I was coming, did you, Vic?"

Victor shook his head.

"How thoughtful," said the dwarf. "How perfect. Like this house. A great setting. I could tell by your letter you were exactly what I need. Your kind always are. Those who live in out-of-the-way places, the quiet ones with no ties. That's the way it has to be. Otherwise I couldn't use you."

"Why do you care what I feel?" asked Victor.

"I told you—research. It gives my work that extra edge. Won't you tell me what's happening inside you right now, Vic?"

"I want to. I do."

"Then you can. You can if you really want it. Aren't we all free to do whatever we want?"

"I almost believed that, once," said Victor.

"Anything," said the dwarf firmly. "You can have anything, including what you want most. Especially that. And what is it you want, Vic?"

"I—I want to write, I guess."

The dwarf's face crinkled with amusement.

"But I don't know what to write about," said Victor.

"Then why do you want to do it?"

"Because I have no one to talk to. No one who could understand."

"And what would you talk to them about, if you could?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do."

"I'm afraid."

"Tell me, Vic. I'll understand. I'll put it down exactly the way you say it. You want me to relieve your fear? Well, in another minute I'm going to do that little thing. You will have nothing more to fear, ever again."

This is it, Victor thought, your chance. Don't blow it. It's happening just the way you had it planned. Don't lose your nerve. Ask the question—now. *Do it.*

"But where does it come from?" asked Victor. "The things you write about. How do you know what to say? Where do you get it? I try, but the things I know aren't—"

"*You want to know,*" said the dwarf, his face splitting in an uproarious grin, "*where I get my ideas?* Is that your question?"

"Well, as a matter of fact—"

"From you, Vic! I get my material from people like you! I get them from this cesspool you call life itself. And you know what? I'll never run out of material, not as long as I go directly to the source, because I'll never, ever finish paying you all back!"

Victor saw the large pores of the dwarf's face, the crooked bend to the nose, the sharpness of the teeth in the feral mouth, the steely glint deep within the black eyes. The hairs prickled on the back of his neck and he pulled away. Tried to pull away. But the dwarf's hand stayed on his head.

"Take my new novel, for instance. It's about an epidemic that's going to sweep the nation, leaving a bloody trail from one end of this country to the other, to wash away all of your sins. At first the police may call it

murder. But the experts will recognize it as suicide, a form of *hara-kiri*, to be precise, which is what it is. I know, because I've made a careful study of the methods. Perfect!"

The underdeveloped features, the cretinous grin filled Victor with sudden loathing, and a terrible fear he could not name touched his scalp. He sat back, pulling father away from the little man.

But the dwarf followed him back, stepping onto the table, one hand still pressing Victor in a grotesque benediction. The lamp glared behind his oversized head, his eyes sparkling maniacally. He rose up and up, unbending his legs, knocking over the bottles, standing taller until he blocked out everything else.

Victor braced against the table and kicked away, but the dwarf leaped onto his shoulders and rode him down. Victor reached out, found the bottle opener and swung it wildly.

"No," he screamed, "my God, no! You're wrong! It's a lie! You're . . . !"

He felt the point of the church key hook into something thick and cold and began to rip.

But too late. A malformed hand dug into his hair and forced his head back, exposing his throat and chest.

"How does *this* feel, Vic? I have to know! Tell my readers!" The other claw darted into the briefcase and dragged forth a blade as long as a bayonet, its edge crusted and sticky but still razor-sharp. "How about this?" cried the dwarf. "And this?"

As Victor raised his hands to cover his throat, he felt the first thrust directly below the rib cage, an almost painless impact, as though he had been struck by a fist in the chest, followed by the long, sawing cut through his vital organs and then the warm pumping of his life's blood down the short sword between them. His fingers tingled and went numb as his hands were wrapped into position around the handle. The ceiling grew bright and the world spun, hurling him free.

"Tell me!" demanded the dwarf.

A great whispering chorus was released within Victor at last, rushing out and rising like a tide to flood the earth, crimson as the rays of a hellishly blazing sun.

But his mouth was choked with his own blood and he could not speak, not a word of it. The vestiges of a final smile moved his glistening lips.

"Tell me!" shrieked the dwarf, digging deeper, while the room turned red. "I must find the perfect method! *Tell me!*"

THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES

XIV

To Dave Carson

*... and there are certain persons—artists twisted and corroded by their
genius—of whom it truly may be said: Here is one who would rather
blow out a candle than curse the light.*

—Kent Allard

The Futility of Awareness

INTRODUCTION

Nurturing Nightmares

WELCOME TO *The Year's Best Horror Stories: Series XIV*.

For some of you this may be your first look at the series; some of you have been readers since the first. A complete set of all fourteen DAW Books editions will fill about nine inches of your shelf and furnish you with enough concentrated shivers to push 10 on the Richter scale. It will also provide an outstanding cross section of the best in horror short fiction over the past fifteen years.

But here, however, you have the best horror stories from the past year—the pick of several hundred of stories published here and abroad during 1985. As always, I have attempted to select these with regard only to overall excellence. There are no taboos, no obligatory Big Names, no restrictions as to any particular type, theme or sub-genre of horror fiction. These are the nineteen stories from 1985 that best succeeded in creating a moment of fear—whether at intellectual or at gut level.

I think you will be intrigued by this year's blend: seventeen short stories, a novelette, and a novella. There are the familiar names as well as new ones—for more than half of the writers here, this is their first appearance in *The Year's Best Horror Stories*. Twelve of the writers are American, six are British, and one is Canadian. A bit over half of the selections are from small press sources, the rest from newsstand magazines or anthologies. In technique, these stories range from the traditional to the experimental, from creepy-crawly nasties to psychological terrors. Some embody a macabre sense of humor, others may pull at your heart—and some may tear it right out. In arranging my notes, I realized that three of the authors here are widely published poets, their prose techniques are dissimilar, yet each story is touched by fire.

The stories here represent the best of horror fiction at the midpoint of the 1980s. I was somewhat surprised to note that only two of these nineteen writers were born before World War II. Such selection was certainly not intentional, and I suspect it represents the renewed energy

that has marked the horror genre over the past decade or so. It's interesting that both of the pre-War-generation writers have turned to horror fiction only in recent years.

In the early years of the pulps, science fiction writers began their careers after having been influenced by The Classics—meaning Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, or perhaps that American newcomer, Edgar Rice Burroughs. Horror writers of that day looked back to Edgar Allan Poe as The Master, and a later generation was inspired by H. P. Lovecraft or M. R. James. Just as today's science fiction writers march to different drums, the new generation of horror writers has been inspired by a later hierarchy of classics. Several of the authors here have mentioned the names of others of the authors in *The Year's Best Horror Stories: Series XIV* as representing particular influences or inspirations for their own writing. We seem to propagate like vampires.

A dozen years ago your editor attended the First World Fantasy Convention and was on a panel entitled "New Voices in Fantasy." Other panel members were such unknown newcomers as Ramsey Campbell, Charles L. Grant, and David Drake. I suppose some will now consider us to be The Old Guard.

Or soon will. The horror genre is vital, changing—and constantly attracting new writers with new ideas and new techniques.

Maybe you're one of them.

How's that bite on your neck.

—Karl Edward Wagner

Penny Daye

Charles L. Grant

The recent boom in horror fiction spawned a host of thirty-day wonders and a legion of instantly forgettable books. The best that can be said of the boom is that it also delivered from obscurity a number of outstanding horror writers whose talents hitherto had been stuffed beneath a bushel basket. I'm certain that Charles L. Grant would have continued to write superior horror fiction until they found him frozen over his typewriter in some unheated garret. Poetic, no doubt—but nicer to see excellence recognized.

Born in New Jersey in 1942, Grant began writing successfully in the late 1960s, and since 1975 he has been able to devote full time to this career. To date he has written or edited some forty books, in addition to another twenty or so under various pseudonyms. Grant was Guest of Honour at Fantasycon IX and then Master of Ceremonies at Fantasycon X—England's predecessor to the World Fantasy Convention. "Penny Daye" was written for the Fantasycon X Programme Booklet and reflects Grant's affection for England—and his finely tuned awareness of the darker side of existence.

I WAS WELL ON my way to being drunk when I first saw Penny Daye, and there have been moments since when I think that perhaps I should have finished the journey. It would not have spared me grief, and it would not have brought me absent luck, but had I done so, I am almost sure I would not have seen the stones, or the Plain, and I would not have heard the wind and the voices it carries.

Almost.

Not quite.

Though I had a number of what I had thought at the time were perfectly good excuses for that onset of inebriation, there were no real reasons were honesty forced upon me. That I was alone, and in a strange country, low on funds and lower still on spirit, should not by themselves have tempted me into the Salisbury pub; but in concert with an afternoon

more gray than light, more winter than fall, I was an easy prey for self-induced depression, easier prey still for the dark bitter stout that was my substitution for lunch.

I suppose I didn't make a very good impression on my English cousins that afternoon, but I rationalized it by reminding myself that I was actually a Scot and therefore need not apologize for any discomfort I caused the oppressors.

That I was American born and bred made no difference to my by then somewhat befuddled mind; that day I was a Scot, and made my silent toast across the water.

It was well over an hour, I think, before I finally realized that if I didn't move soon, if I didn't get some fresh air and something solid in my stomach, I'd probably have to be carried to my train. The potential embarrassment stirred me, ancestral pride be damned, and I paid my bill and did my best not to stagger outside.

The air was damp, too chilled by the wind for my light jacket and sweater, and I decided to head directly back to the station and punish my stupidity by sitting on a hard and cold British Rail bench, fully exposed to the elements while I waited for transport back to London.

I didn't, however, have all that far to go.

The pub was just around the corner and down a gentle slope from my destination, and as I made my way upward, stifling a few belches and grimacing at the sour aftertaste, I decided there had to be something hitched to my fate that was preventing me from seeing Stonehenge, only a few miles away. This was the second time I had made the journey, and the second time circumstance had prevented me from completing the not-very-long trip out to the stones.

The first occasion was just over a year ago, when I was here with a companion who, on my more charitable days, I might have called my fiancée. She was not, if the truth be known, all that interested in places of possible human sacrifice if she couldn't at least see a bit of dried blood, and she talked me at the last into a sidetrip to what she called a quaint, authentic market in the centre of town, near the cathedral, where most of our allotted funds for the day were spent, and soon forgotten. We barely did make the last train.

She is long gone now, coping in California with a budding screenwriter, and though I had kidded myself about actually wanting to visit the ruins this time, I think it was merely one more way to flay myself for losing her, and to hate myself for not having the courage to do anything about it.

Slowly then, with hands deep in my trouser pockets, I made my way

morosely to the red-brick stationhouse, found the right track, and sat down.

And saw her.

She was on the platform opposite, silently standing apart from a group of young people in varying shades of leather, and those whose hair had been dyed several unnatural but undeniably attractive colours. They were singing boisterously. She was holding her hands in front of her, ignoring them and staring at me.

At least, I thought she was staring at me.

Her coat was camel's hair, her scarf burgundy, her hat a black tam prettily cocked on deep black hair. Though I leaned forward a bit and stared, I could not quite make out her features; it was as if the area had recently been swept through by a faint, disorienting fog. But I knew she was lovely, could see her well enough to make out the pinches of red at her full round cheeks.

It was the drink that made me bold enough to smile.

It must have been the drink that made me think she smiled back and nodded.

Then one of those high-speed monsters blasted through the station, scattering dust and scraps of paper and forcing my eyes closed. The noise one of those trains makes is not unlike the prolonged clap of the sound barrier being shattered, and when it was gone and my eyes were open again, the place where she stood was empty.

I got to my feet at once and moved towards the tracks.

The kids were still there, but she was gone.

I turned then toward the stairs, thinking rather hopefully that she had been attracted to me and had decided to join me, shaking my head at the conceited notion, yet straightening myself up all the same.

She didn't come.

And had not my own train arrived at just that moment, I think I would have gone in search of her. But there were meetings in the city I had to attend, business partners to appease for my recent lack of success, and ruffled feathers to be oiled down with flagrant promises and white lies.

I needn't have worried.

I saw her again, one month later.

It was one week from the end of my trip, and I didn't want to go back. I had seen enough of London, enough of the country, to realize that the legendary British reserve was no more a fact than the so-called cold indifference of New Yorkers. My business, if not my self-esteem, had been temporarily salvaged, my interest in history reawakened simply by walking through so much of it so well preserved, and I was, at the last,

almost calling it home, even to the point of feeling disgusted whenever I saw American tourists making boors of themselves.

I was no longer a tourist, you see; I was fitting in, and I liked it.

So I decided that I would, by god and damn the torpedoes, get back to Salisbury and see those damned stones.

So I took the train, walked down the hill and decided to have a pint to warm me up before catching the bus.

Which I did, though it was more than one, and though it took me near to an hour before I started out again.

And thus I was encased in a mellow, autumnal glow when I caught the bus, sat on the upper deck on the bench seat in front, and watched the town and countryside lurch past me as we headed for Salisbury Plain. I dozed a little; the bus's interior was quite warm. I listened to an elderly woman chiding her husband for forgetting something at the market; her voice was strident, and we were the only ones up there. And I began to think that perhaps I wouldn't go home after all. To be honest, there wasn't much there for me to go back to—an apartment, an office, the infrequent evening excursion to dinner and to bed.

It all seemed, suddenly, awfully bleak and weary.

Then the bus ground gears over the crest of a low hill, and I leaned forward in my front seat, and saw them.

My first reaction was one of disappointment. In the movies, and on the postcards, the monoliths appeared to be hundreds of feet high; they weren't. And the circle they described was considerably smaller than I had imagined. But as the roadway dipped and we approached the turnoff to the parking lot on our right, I felt it. Even on the clattering, fume-filled bus I felt it quite strongly—a sense of age, a sense of melancholy, and I swear that a chill momentarily prickled along my arms.

I couldn't wait to get off, and did so immediately the bus pulled over. There were a number of tourist coaches filling, and several cars pulling out. The ringstones were on the other side of the highway, and one had to purchase a ticket here, then walk through a tunnel under the road, to a ramp that led up to the monuments themselves.

I stared dumbly at the ticket window.

"Closed?" I said. "How the hell can Stonehenge be closed, for god's sake?"

The woman behind the glass smiled sadly and shrugged. Rules, she told me, were rules, and she couldn't let me pass.

I turned my gaze from her to the tunnel, back again and sighed. The return bus to Salisbury was already gone, and another wouldn't be along for well over an hour. Still, I told myself sternly, you're here and you

might as well make the best of it, don't you think? So I walked up to the verge and looked over the other side.

They were there, lying, tilting, standing, a worn path in a great arc around them, a rope-fence to keep the souvenir hunters from taking their chips and gouges.

I felt it again—age, and melancholy, and the wind that danced continuously over the Plain, rounding the ringstones' edges and flattening the low grass, putting voices in my ears that I could not understand.

I imagine I made a rather forlorn picture, because a few minutes later a stout puffing man in a smart dark uniform and round cap came up beside me. He was much shorter than I, his face red and creased, and without a word he handed me a fat silver flask.

"Pity," he said, instinctively knowing my position. "It's best to come here alone, too. You come in a group, there's all chattering and questions and you can't get a true feel for what you see, if you know what I mean."

I nodded.

We introduced ourselves then, after another round of something that had no relation to brandy, but had the fire just the same. His name was Peter Jones, and he was a guide for the helpless who didn't know what they were looking at.

We talked, and we sipped, and we stared at the circle until, as the sky darkened and a fleet of black clouds massed on the horizon, he took my arm. I frowned. He winked and said that we can't have reporters all the way from America losing out on this last chance, now can we? I grinned, then, and followed him, down the incline, past the ticket booth and through the tunnel. No one stopped us, though someone who might have been his boss gave him a dark, disgusted look.

By the time we climbed up the other side, we were alone.

"Do you want the lecture, John Dalton?" he asked.

I shook my head. He had spoken in a reverential whisper, and I knew why—this place, far larger, far more grand than the space it occupied, was more like a cathedral than any cathedral I'd ever been to. If I were so inclined, I would have said that the forces which had created it, and sustained it, were still hard at work in preservation, and perhaps preparation.

I shivered.

Peter nodded and passed me the flask.

We made the circuit, all the way around to the ragged, aslant Heel Stone, and I was trying to imagine what the circle must have been like with all its pieces intact and standing, when I saw her.

The woman from Salisbury station.

She was in the middle of the monument, wearing the same clothes, sitting on one of the fallen blocks.

I grabbed Peter's arm and pointed. He looked, lifted his shoulders against the wind, and pulled me back off the path before handing me the flask. By this time I was more warm inside than out, and my mind had a tendency to wander into places where I knew I didn't belong. But I did see her. I wasn't so drunk that I was imagining it. I knew she was there.

Especially when Peter said, "She's dead, you know."

"Is she?" I asked calmly, and didn't object when he pulled me down onto the ground, where we sat cross-legged, watching that beautiful woman watching us. She was framed now between two of the larger, linteled pieces, and there was nothing behind her but the circle and the sky. We heard no cars, no buses, no planes passed overhead. "Is she really?"

"Indeed." He looked at me sideways. "You're not afraid?"

I shrugged. "I don't think so."

"Good man. There are those I know who tend to feel a little threatened when they see her. Mind, she's never done anyone, but it is a bit unsettling, you've got to give it that."

It was.

And what was worse—I felt a dim part of me shrieking with laughter because here I was, sitting on dead grass with a dead-drunk guide, staring at a dead woman and believing every word.

"A shame," I said.

"It is that."

"What killed her?"

"Oh, the stones."

"What happened? One of them fall?"

We passed the flask.

"No, nothing like that, John, nothing at all. She came here one day in winter . . . oh, a few years back it was. All alone. Sat right where she's sitting now and froze to death."

"That doesn't make any sense. Surely someone would have seen her. You, maybe, or one of the others."

Jones shook his head. "No one. Not until the next morning. It was snowing, you see, and with the fences, the road closed, no one saw her until dawn. A motorist. He called the constables in Amesbury and they came out to fetch her. Too late, of course. Frozen stiff, and make no mistake about it."

She was beautiful. I still couldn't see her features clearly for the wind blowing in my eyes, but she was beautiful.

"Suicide," I guessed.

"No. The stones."

"You said that already."

"So I did. Well, I'll say it a third time—it was the stones that did it."

"She tried to take a piece of them?"

He scoffed, and we shared the last of the drink before he pointed to someone's name spray-painted on one of the monoliths' faces. "What are you thinking, man, the stones were protecting themselves? Then why didn't they take care of the little bugger what did that?"

I didn't know.

I belched.

"Cute little darling, isn't she," he said.

"I think I'm in love."

"Oh, yes, you might be. You might be at that."

"You think so?"

He nudged me with an elbow, gave me a wink. "Why don't you introduce yourself?" And he giggled.

"We've already met. Sort of."

"Really, now. You don't say. Where?"

"At the station. The train station in Salisbury. I saw her on the platform, and she smiled at me."

Peter sighed with delight. "Ah, so she's getting around at last. It's nice. I'd hate to think of her being stuck out here all the time."

A sudden gust nearly shoved me over, and my head cleared for an instant. "Jesus," I said, "we're talking about a damned ghost!"

"Penny Daye," he replied.

"What?"

"Penny Daye. That's her name. You should at least know her name if you're going to make remarks."

I scrambled unsteadily to my feet and stood over him.

"Peter, sober up, for god's sake." I passed a hand over my eyes, took a deep breath, and looked again.

She was still there.

Smiling at me.

"Jesus," I whispered.

Peter hiccupped.

I wanted to clout him over the head then, kick at him, force him to admit that he was playing a marvelous, and certainly well-executed, joke on me. But he only burst into cackling laughter and rolled onto his back, his cap spinning away in the wind, the flask bouncing free on the grass.

I waved at him disgustedly and started for the circle, watching the woman as her smile broadened and she adjusted her coat primly over

her knees. When I reached the restraining rope, I stepped over it, barely thinking that I might be laying myself open for a hell of a big fine, and ignored Peter's sudden shout of warning.

For which of us, I didn't know.

She winked, and one hand lifted to rest against her cheek, an invitation to dance if I ever saw one.

Peter yelled again as I passed under the lintel.

I turned and grinned at him, swayed when the wind touched me, swayed again when it stopped.

And when I turned back, she was gone.

I nearly fell in my haste to get to where she'd been sitting, and did fall once I reached it, by snaring my foot in a depression hidden in tangled grass. My hands flew out to catch me, and I still came up against the stone hard with my chest, momentarily knocking the air from my lungs. My eyes teared, my ribs protested, and it was several gasping minutes before I was able to straighten up and look around.

She was gone.

So was Peter.

And suddenly I was too tired to chase after either one of them.

Too many drinks, too many years, too many disappointments of which this had to be the last straw.

At that moment there was a rage I didn't think I had in me, and I didn't care if anyone saw what I was doing; I hoisted myself up and sat there, ankles crossed, hands in my lap, looking out over the Plain and listening to the wind, watching the light vanish, watching the shadows grow out of the stones.

And hearing the aged voices that cling to the air, filled with angry tears and angry questions I have seen myself shed and heard myself ask whenever I turn on my light and there's no one home but me.

I think there's a hint of snow in the air.

Voices in false melancholy, telling me now as they have told Penny Daye and all the others before her that if I could do to the world what I believed the world had done to me, I will not have to stay long.

All I need is one person. One woman. Perhaps finding her on the bus, or at the station, or on a corner. One woman to smile at, one woman who knows what it's like to be alone.

He's dead, you know, Peter will say.

A woman to love me fleetingly, to cherish me briefly, dream of me just once in a large empty bed.

Froze to death, right where he's sitting.

To lure to my side because that's all there is left.

The stones did it.

It made me smile, as it had made her smile before she brought me to the place where the stones held me fast.

The stones.

It brought a color to my cheeks I haven't had since I was a child, a color I would take with me, as she had, to find me.

It's the color of the weak and the meek and those who suffer for romance, because romance has no heart.

It's Penny Daye's color.

It's the color of revenge.

Dwindling

David B. Silva

David B. Silva is editor/publisher of The Horror Show, a quarterly magazine and one of the most promising small-press publications of recent years. Often when a small-press editor also has ambitions as a writer, the temptation to publish his own work is irresistible and the results almost certainly unfortunate. Not so for Silva, who has avoided this trap and chosen instead to publish his stories elsewhere—and with considerable success—in a number of small-press magazines (“Dwindling” is from Spectrum Stories) and in anthologies such as Masques, Cold Sweats, and Damnations. Born July 11, 1950 in Carmel, California, Silva now lives in Oak Run, California—dividing his time about 75-25 between The Horror Show and his own fiction. Silva has been writing for about five years now, and he has a novel due out from Leisure Books.

IN THE SUMMER, just after school let out, the pastures were still green and there was a freshness in the air that wouldn't die until the raw August temperatures broiled it from memory. The wind was tender and breezy then. During the day, the sky was a faint blue. But near sundown it would open its throat and the blue would turn purple, thick and rich and friendly. It had always been a special time of year for Derrick.

As he scooted off the last bus, making its last stop of the school year, and gazed across the forever fields to the farmhouse, a vague and chilling premonition marched in gooseflesh up his arms. The sensation was too obscure to trouble him. But as he kicked stones at his younger brothers and slowly made his way home, he made note of the bitter feeling and how similar it tasted to the bitterness he had experienced the day before Grandma Sanders had died. Then Georgie hit him in the back with a dirt clod and the feeling was put aside.

Six-year-old Tammy folded her hands in front of her, bowed her head,

and took a deep breath. "Thank you, Lord, for this food upon our table. Amen."

"Amen," said in chorus, then hands, small-medium-large, reached for corn on the cob and broth of chicken and fresh green salad made of lettuce and tomato, bell pepper and carrot, celery and onion. There was hot homemade bread and cold unpasteurized milk. Everything and everyone that was important in Derrick's life was all right there. Except for . . .

"Where's Sarah?" he asked as he buttered a slice of bread that warmed the palm of his hand. And when no one answered, he asked again, "Where's Sarah?" this time looking directly at his mother. Her eyes seemed tired, as if she were gone somewhere faraway in a daydream. A swirl of black hair, singed with lean flames of gray, fell across her forehead. She brushed it back, seeming never to have left the daydream. "Mom?"

"Hmm?" she said, only half-there.

"I asked where Sarah was?"

"Who?"

"Sarah."

For a moment, there was an eerie pause in the meal. Forks stalled in mid-air. Mouths were closed, ears were opened, and a dozen questioning eyes turned to stare at him. *Who's Sarah?*

Then Tammy grinned, and with her mouth full of thick, cheesy casserole, she said, "Betcha Derr's got a girlfriend."

Derrick felt himself blushing then, even though he had nothing at all to blush about. He was just curious about Sarah, that's all. No big deal. He was sure she was all right, someone would have told him if she weren't. So he smiled uncomfortably and turned back to his plate of vegetables, doing his best to divert the attention away from him.

His thoughts about Sarah would just have to wait.

Derrick didn't breathe another word of her until he was in bed that night. Brian was already asleep in the corner, one of his arms hanging off the edge of the bed, his hand brushing against the floor. Georgie was tossing in the bottom bunk, rocking himself back and forth as he did every night until he eventually fell asleep. From the upper bunk, Derrick whispered, "Georgie?"

"What?" The light sway of the bunk beds stopped.

"Where's Sarah?"

The rocking started up again.

"Georgie?"

"I don't know."

Derrick leaned over the edge of his bed. "If you don't stop that blessed rocking, I'm gonna slug you."

"I don't even know who she is," his brother whispered.

And for a moment, Derrick couldn't believe his ears. "She's your sister," he said. "Your sister! The one that tried to eat the tail right off your kite yesterday."

"That was Tammy," his brother quietly said before he rolled over, face to the wall, back to Derrick where he could see a luminescent iron-on patch of the Incredible Hulk glowing green in the dark. "Ain't one pesky sister bad enough for you?"

Derrick could have argued. He could have pointed out a handful of recent incidents when little Sarah had pestered both of them. Little sisters did things like that. And eventually he could have made Georgie admit that Sarah was missing. But he didn't. Somewhere inside, gnawing at his gut, Derrick knew that there had never been a Sarah, that her four years of giggling and gurgling and crying—sometimes all night long—had been little more than an imaginative spasm, a bizarre tic on the face of his reality. And that's why they had all stared at him with eyes that asked, *Who's Sarah?* Because there was no Sarah. His imagination had been playing games in his head, as it must do with everyone, as it did when Tammy played tea party with playmates that weren't really there.

An imaginative spasm.

That's what it was.

The summer's first one-hundred-degree temperature arrived less than a week later, pushing the mercury above the red zone on the rusting Orange Crush thermometer that had been tacked to the big oak as long as Derrick could remember.

Pa had allowed them the day down at Miner's Pond. Clad in cut-offs made from an old pair of jeans he'd worn out during the winter, Derrick was busy cleaning the spring weeds out of the little patch of sand which covered the ground between the water and the cliff of rock they used as a diving platform. The others were already in the water, squirming and churning enough to make the pond look like a pot of boiling watercress soup.

Tammy let out a squeal just before Brian dunked her.

Sometimes, like now, when her hair was damp and it closely embraced her thin, almost-hollow cheeks, he would see Sarah looking out from Tammy's laughing eyes. Even though he realized that there had never been a Sarah. And when he remembered those special things she would

do, those special things his imagination had made so real for him—like the time she tried to cut her own hair and Ma nearly had to shave her head to make it all even again—after times like those, he wished she had been more than just a daydream.

But she hadn't. He knew that now. She was gone, her dolls were gone, her clothes were gone. There had never been a real Sarah.

Derrick collapsed into the soft sand and sifted his strange emptiness from hand to hand in the form of a thousand gritty particles.

"Come on, Derr," one of the others called.

He smiled and shook his head, all of a sudden feeling too old to be splashing carelessly in Miner's Pond. And he felt a little sad just then, as if at age twelve he had suddenly realized that the time was nearing when he would have to give up some of those cherished things that stood between being a boy and being a man. Perhaps the joy of Miner's Pond. Perhaps some other never-to-be-forgotten place or time or person.

That's what his parents had done. Over the years, they had somehow given up their happiness for something else, something he wasn't sure he understood. And maybe that was what growing up was all about. Giving away those things you liked most about yourself.

If so, it didn't seem fair.

"Derr, come on!"

It didn't seem fair at all.

Derrick wiped sand from the butt of his cut-offs, and with a laughter he wasn't yet ready to give up, he did a painful belly flop into the circle of his brothers and sister.

It felt great.

They played away the afternoon, exploring creek rocks for crawdads, building a miniature dam to house minnows, diving off the cliff, playing tag up and down the creek's banks until their feet were sore and their bodies were bright pink from too much sun.

It was getting time to head back home again.

Derrick had gathered up the towels they had brought along, and the lunch bags which Ma would want returned for recycling. The others were down the creek a ways. He could hear their laughter whistling through the pawlike leaves of the oak trees.

"Gotta go!" he yelled as he shook the sand out of the towels. He liked being big brother, the one they looked up to and depended upon. Sometimes, he felt more like their father than their brother.

"Let's go!" he called again.

The boys came bursting through the bushes. Brian collapsed in the sand. "Beat ya," he said, lying flat on his back.

"Did not," Georgie cried. His arms were braced on his legs as he collected a breath. His eyes kept looking to Brian, as if he knew he had been beaten and wondered if his younger brother might make too big a deal out of it.

"Where's Tammy?" Derrick asked. "Pa's gonna be real upset if we don't get ourselves back by supper time."

Brian dragged himself to his feet. "I beat ya," he said again, pushing Georgie up the side of the short bank. When they had made it to the top, they stopped and turned back to their older brother. "Thought you were in a hurry." Brian said.

"What about Tammy?"

Then there was a short pause that seemed to last forever, and his brothers exchanged a curious glance. Then a chill wound up Derrick's spine as he recognized their bewilderment. He didn't inquire a third time. The story was still fresh in his mind. *Who's Tammy? Just another spasm, that's all. No need to ask further, just fill in the blanks. There is no Tammy. There never has been. She was just a product of the same game, the same hiccup of imagination that birthed Sarah. And now they were both gone.* An imaginative quirk, that's all it was.

"Derr, it's getting late."

He glanced up at the voice and wondered, almost casually, if the two boys who had been his brothers for almost every minute of his life, if they too, were mere quirks. The thought scared him.

"Derr . . ."

"Yeah," he said, flipping the towels over his shoulders. "Coming."

Tammy never returned. He knew she wouldn't. And like his parents and his brothers, he never asked about her.

That night, Brian went off to sleep in his own room, the room that Derrick's imagination had lent to Sarah and Tammy. It seemed lonelier without Brian sleeping in the corner, without his arm hung over the edge of the bed, brushing a hand against the floor. At least he still felt the comfort of Georgie's rocking, the comfort of the bunk bed swaying back and forth as it had always done as long as he could remember. At least that hadn't been taken from him.

Summertime lost its magic after that. The days became too hot, Miner's Pond too cold. The beautiful yellows and greens around the farm shriveled, becoming deathly browns. The laughter that had so often

swept around the dinner table, became a whisper, a cough of its past joy. Everything changed, and somewhere along the line, memories of yesterdays gradually became more and more difficult to call up again, as if pieces of his life were somehow being consumed. The magic of summertime had been lost and everything was suddenly different.

Even his parents seemed somehow different, somehow changed. He wasn't sure exactly what the difference was, and wondered if perhaps it was merely his imagination at play again.

"Remember before?" Derrick heard his mother ask his father one night. They were outside on the front porch, casually gliding back and forth on the porch swing, allowing themselves to be overheard by the evening stars and by Derrick himself. He was upstairs in the attic, poking through old boxes of toys, searching for a game of Cootie which he hadn't seen in years. Just a bored-night impulse, that was the only reason he was there.

"Before what?" Pa said.

The arthritic squeaking of metal to rusting metal filled the moment of silence and drew Derrick curiously closer to the window.

"Before we got married," she said. "Remember how we used to walk along Dogwood Creek at night and the breeze would rustle through the trees, sounding like God himself was trying to talk to us? And how we always knew we'd get married and live out the rest of our lives together? How it was never gonna change?"

Pa chuckled. "I remember."

"I miss those times," she told him.

"Guess I do, as well."

"They were *good* times."

"The best," his Pa agreed.

"I want to go back." The rhythmic squeaking paused for a breath, then started up again. I want it to be like it was then, without the worries and the fears, without the kids and the farm to look after."

Pa didn't say so much as "Hmm."

"Mind ya, I'm not unhappy," she said. "But it's all slipping by so quickly. I want to do it all again. I want to court and marry and make babies all over again, like it was the first time."

"Been feeling this way all summer, have you?"

Derrick couldn't see them on the porch, they were sitting almost right underneath him, but he imagined her nodding her head. He stepped back from the window, suddenly feeling a strange sense of shame from his eavesdropping, realizing his ears had crossed the path of something they were never meant to hear. But they *had* heard, and Ma *had* been different

all summer. Perhaps that was the only trick of his imagination that hadn't really been a trick. She *had* been different. The whole summer had been different.

He left the attic without ever finding the game of Cootie.

Brian blinked out of his life two days later. Derrick woke up to find the bottom bunk empty and when he went searching for Georgie, he found the ten-year-old in Brian's room where Brian should have been, rocking Brian's bed the way he used to rock the bunk beds.

"What are you doing in here?" he asked. "Where's Brian?"

Through sleepy eyes, Georgie expressed his puzzlement, that same puzzlement that had surfaced after each of Derrick's summer-long inquiries, after each loss that had seemingly slipped away unnoticed. And Derrick knew, he knew and he understood and he felt the emptiness devour another portion of his life. Georgie was all he had left, and what would happen after his last brother slipped away?

What would happen then?

It was early August all too soon. The fields were dry and dusty. Miner's Pond had dipped so low that a soul couldn't dive off the cliffs without meeting the bottom head first. His mom was looking different by the day. His father was too. Like the summer hadn't withered them like everything else it touched. Like they thrived somehow on the heat and the dirt and the peace that had shadowed the farm. That's what it was—peace. Too much for Derrick's liking. The meals were too quiet, the days too empty.

He stayed close to Georgie whenever he could, whenever he wasn't off tending to chores or running errands or sleeping in his own bed, a wall away from his little brother. But it happened just the same.

He woke up one morning and he was the last, all his brothers and all his sisters were finally gone. He was all that remained. And he imagined his parents breathing a heavy sigh, relieved that at last the inevitable moment was near, the moment when their oldest child would finally slip away like the others.

There were days now, unlike past summers, when he wished he had never been the oldest, the last to go. How much easier it would have been to have simply slipped away like Sarah, right at the beginning, never having to watch as the others were taken one by one, never having to feel each loss. How much easier.

Each day thereafter painfully dwindled away, seconds feeling like minutes, minutes like hours, until his leave-taking finally arrived. It was nine-thirty. The sky was black on a moonless night. The window was open, inviting the slight breeze inside to chase away the godawful heat.

It was like a thousand other summer nights, yet unlike any that had come his way before. From the top bunk, with his arms folded behind his neck, he gazed out the window to the darkness of the universe and wondered where it ended, wondered if he would float out there after . . .

. . . as he sometimes did in his dreams.

"Derr?" A shaft of hall light sectioned his darkness, and his mother's silhouette filled the doorway. "How you doing?"

"Okay." He didn't want to look at her, kept his watch on the universe instead. It would be easier that way. But she crept into the darkness, right up next to his bed, and she stood over him, a shaft of light falling across her face. It was the first time, as he forced himself to look at her, that he realized just how she had changed over the summer.

"is it too hot for you?"

The singe of gray that had danced like a wind-blown scarf through her hair was no longer there.

"I'm comfortable."

And her eyes had come alive again, they had a sparkle in them that he hadn't noticed in years.

"You sure?" She brushed the hair away from his forehead, then held his hand in hers. "You know I love you," she said.

Derrick glanced out the bedroom window at the watching universe. He wanted to tell her he still loved her, but knew he wouldn't be able to find a way to say the words.

"Remember that," she said. "Remember I love you." Then all too quickly, she turned and started out of the room.

"Ma," he said, still moving away. "Are you sorry I'm your son? Are you and Pa sorry you ever had me?"

She paused, a wisp of shadow in the doorway. "Of course not. You're our son, our flesh and blood. You're a part of us. We'll always love you."

"Even if I have to go away?"

Her eyes were hidden in a checkerboard pattern of black and white, but the long silence answered his question for her. And he knew then that she didn't even understand what she had done, that it had all been done out of innocence, out of an ignorance of the consequences of her wishing. *I want to court and marry and make babies all over again, like it was the first time.*

"I still love you, Ma," he told her. "Even if I have to go away."

"There's nowhere to go," she said. "Nowhere at all."

The bedroom door closed.

Darkness rushed in through the open window.

Derrick rolled over, rolled away from his doorway to the windowed

universe, until he was nestled safely in the wings of his blankets. Then a single tear tumbled down his cheek, a tear not for himself, but for his mother.

Dead Men's Fingers

Phillip C. Heath

Born in Austin, Texas in 1953, Phillip C. Heath moved about the country a bit until the lure of the Lone Star State brought him back again. Currently he works as a real estate representative for a large corporation in Dallas. By his own confession, Heath has "a soft spot for the Gothic or Victorian style"—a fondness that has probably relegated his work to the pages of small-press publications where they don't attract the notice his stories deserve. Heath is a careful craftsman, with a deft touch for conjuring forth an icy atmosphere of fear. A pity that major horror markets demand trendy, as opposed to traditional, fiction. Nonetheless, Heath has established a reputation in the small press, with appearances in Whispers, Fantasy Tales, Damnations, Gothic, The Horror Show, and elsewhere. His stories have also been anthologized in The Year's Best Fantasy Stories, The Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories, The Fontana Book of Great Horror Stories, and Nightmares. "Dead Men's Fingers" is from the new Canadian fantasy magazine, Borderland.

*So is the great and wide sea also; wherein are things
creeping innumerable, both small and great beasts.
There to the ships, and there is that Leviathan;
whom thou hast made to take his pastime therein.
These wait all upon thee; that thou mayest give them
meat in due season.
—The Book of Common Prayer*

"SAIL HOOOO!"

All eyes were abruptly averted upward.

"Where away?" someone bellowed.

The lookout, seated precariously on his perch in the crosstrees a hundred feet above the rolling sea, pointed one hand to the horizon, cupping his mouth with the other. "A barque by the look of 'er," he sang out, "'ull down about four points forward the starb'rd beam!"

The British whaleship, *Jezebel*, came alive. Every man on board forsook his various chores and rushed anxiously to the bulwarks to gaze out over the deep, blue expanse of water. The first mate promptly informed his superior, Captain Seabury, who emerged from his cabin to join his crew topside. Adjusting a brass spyglass to his eye, he summarily gave the order to alter course, and soon the English frigate was tacking toward the small speck on the skyline roughly three leagues distant.

Undoubtedly a single, similar pattern of thought played through the minds of the mariners who watched as they steadily closed the distance between the two vessels. It had thus far been a rather disheartening voyage: from London across the Atlantic—by now virtually depleted of the sperm—was a long and tiresome journey in itself. Southward, the once bountiful Brazil grounds offered few sightings and little encouragement. On past the chill, barren Falkland Islands, they struggled around Cape Horn, the southern tip of South America. Though summer in those latitudes, the ship battled its way through tremendous head seas and skirted frightful fields of Antarctic ice, enduring howling gales for almost three weeks, as nights and days merged into gray sameness. Once having gained the Pacific to the west, they spotted, gave chase and killed two baleen whales near the island of Massafuero, several hundred miles off the coast of Chile, but one of them sank before it could be properly hitched and was lost.

So the men aboard the *Jezebel* understandably were impatient to reap the rewards of their hardship. A whaleman's life was necessarily shaped by loneliness and exhilaration, tedium and terror; always voracious for nature's bounty—if he could persevere to secure it, for he was well aware of how sorely the odds were against him, and in favor of his adversary. Admittedly, last year was a very profitable one for Pacific whaling, yet with scarcely six hundred barrels of oil in the hold no one need be reminded that scores of ships in the past, for whatever reasons, had returned home freighting barely enough cargo to pay expenses. Hence, they were keen to have a customary gam, or visit, with this passing vessel—hopefully a sister whaler—and learn what favorable prospects might lie waiting in the vast and trackless sea ahead.

As the *Jezebel* neared the other ship they saw that it was indeed a whaler, about one hundred feet long, of approximately 370 tons; and although was square-rigged except for the mizzenmast, all but the light sails had been reefed, as if already hove to for the night. Whalers were seldom under way in darkness except when traveling between whaling grounds or trailing a wounded whale—but it was scarcely late afternoon. Closer still, and it was observed that the ship seemed somewhat ne-

glected; the entire hull was encrusted with barnacles, and it looked a bit ragged overall. From the way it rode in the water, listing slightly to starboard, it gave the impression of being either fully laden in bulk or else had sprung a leak. But what was most peculiar—disconcerting, in fact—was that there was absolutely no movement or sign of life on deck. Whereupon someone noticed the pennants flying at three mastheads—a signal for help.

They maneuvered alongside the other ship, identified by the lettering on its stern as the *Reaper*, and lines were thrown across and made fast.

At first the possibility of a plague was debated, and the consequences of close contact between ships. However, the captain theorized this was probably not the case, nevertheless restricting anybody from boarding the vessel unless expressly authorized.

He squinted to the west. "It shall be dark in an hour or so," he mumbled to himself. Then, to the boatswain: "Back the maintops'l, and proceed to snug her for the night. Mr. Cribb?"

The first mate, a swarthy, broad-shouldered chap, appeared at his side. "Aye, sir?"

"Pick two of the deckies to accompany us," he instructed. "We must board her and investigate ere nightfall takes us."

The others were mustered, and the informal party clambered on board the *Reaper*. The ship was cloaked in an eerie hush. Only a vagrant, light breeze periodically set the shrouds to moaning softly.

Captain Seabury turned to the others. "One of you men have a thorough look-see topside, another search the fo'c's'le; Mr. Cribb, you explore the contents of the hold, and I shall locate the captain's quarters." They nodded and separated accordingly.

Belowdecks, it was even more oppressively deserted than above. The narrow companionway led directly to the captain's cabin, and Captain Seabury descended into a deepening gloom. Once in the cabin he called out to the crowded shadows. "Ahoy! Anyone about?"

There was no answer, save the dull, choppy gurgle of the sea as it washed along the outer hull of the ship. In the semi-darkness he tripped over a chair on his way to the captain's desk, but there found a scrimshaw lantern and lit the candle nub within. Aided by the dim light he eased next into the captain's head, empty, and the captain's stateroom—which was not. On the berth reposed the form of a body, covered completely by a blanket that appeared to be riddled with holes and blotched with dark stains, which he quickly recognized as dried blood. A discharged pistol lay on the floor beside the bed. Something thin and white protruded from the edge of the blanket.

Captain Seabury reached down and jerked off the blanket.

His stomach clenched. It was a human skeleton, still clothed in only a tatter of rags, and one of the hands held a Bible to its chest. A conspicuous hole in the side of the skull indicated a suicide.

Unwilling to tarry, Captain Seabury pushed on to the first and second mates' cabins which were both unoccupied. But in the former he discovered the ship's logbook. This, he knew, should divulge at least some hint as to what had occurred aboard this mystery ship. The book was opened to the final entry, dated just two days ago. He was going to scan it there and then but a sudden noise close by caught his attention, and he wheeled around, listening.

Yet now there was nothing, only continued silence.

Deciding to wait until later to peruse the journal at length, he rummaged the pantry. There he found ample reserves of smoked meat, salt fish, hard-baked rye bread, beans and rice, and other foodstuffs, as well as kegs of cider and grog. No, it was not starvation that had doomed the men of the *Reaper*.

In the steerage the captain discovered a second body sprawled out near the foot of the companionway ladder, this one a skeleton also. A small oil-lamp was shattered beneath it, leaving a lightly charred spot. Evidently the person had been carrying the lamp and stumbled or fallen upon it with his chest, the flame quickly smothering under his weight.

"Captain! Where ye be?" he heard the first mate calling.

Mr. Cribb emerged from the doorway of the blubber room. When he espied Captain Seabury hovering over the skeletal remains, he nodded in acknowledgment. "Aye, I saw it as I came down." Another of the men met them and joined in, pointing a thumb behind him. "I found three of 'is mates in the fo'c's'le—nothing but bones, jest like 'im."

The trio stood speechless a moment, contemplating the macabre figure at their feet. Then Mr. Cribb broke the spell.

"Sir, I been to the hole . . . I think you'd best take a peek."

They followed him down the hatchway into the stinking, stifling hold, black as that of a slave ship. In the wavering shadows they stepped carefully, for the stairs and gangways were more often than not slick with oil and scum and could be hazardous.

The captain lifted his light high, and saw no need for explanation as to Cribb's discovery. The hold was crammed to capacity with whale oil—no less than 2,500 barrels!

The first mate drew his master's attention to the alarming level of water which covered the ballast and almost all of the bottom rows of barrels.

"It's more than bilge water, sir. See how the frames are unusually damp? I believe she's been slowly takin' on water—shipworms, I'd be a-guessin'."

Just then they all heard a distinct scraping, rustling sort of sound, coming from several pools of darkness beyond the candle's feeble, flickering glow.

The third man glanced over his shoulder. "I 'eard quare noises meself," he whispered uneasily, "when I was forwurd."

"And I, too," added Cribb.

The captain frowned but kept his sedate demeanor. "Rats, most likely. Though 'tis odd they have not vacated this part of the ship, considering the seepage." It was a common fact that rats flourished on such vessels, attracted by whale oil and blood. But somehow that reassurance did not put their minds at ease.

Captain Seabury smacked his lips in dismissal. "Well, let us be off. The rest of the crew will begin to wonder for our safety."

Once on deck, the fourth sailor reported to the captain.

"The blokes must 'ave bane tryin'-out a whale, sir; but everythin' seems to be in a bit of a 'urrah's nest, like they just up an' quit. The cuttin' platform is still in place, and the try-pots is full."

"Anything else?"

The man nodded quizzically. "Aye, three of the boats is missin'; the other two 'ave bane deliberately scuttled—aven the spare." It was true; the remaining whaleboats hung from their davits, all rendered useless by a vandal's axe.

Twilight had by now deepened into dusk, a starry but moonless night. Back on board the *Jezebel* Mr. Cribb took Captain Seabury aside for a private conversation. "What do you suppose, sir?—abandoned a slowly sinkin' ship? Mutiny?"

The captain creased his brow in thought. "She's of Yankee origin, probably making for home. But a whole crew suddenly deserting in three whaleboats on the open sea? They wouldst fare a much better chance staying with her till the end, pressing her as far as possible toward the nearest landfall. And mutiny?—why leave a full hold? More yet, what of those sad skeletons? Surely, 'tis a queer business. But perhaps this will furnish the key." He tapped the log.

Cribb seemed restless. "By your leave, sir," he continued, "you know me not to be a hen-hearted man, but somethin' about this gives me the willies. I for one would sleep better this night if that—ship—were cast off and kept at a wide berth. At least until we can puzzle it out."

The captain shook his head slowly and clutched the other's shoulder.

His voice was resolute. "I respect your concern, my friend, but I feel 'tis unwarranted to that extent. I must also respect the best interests of the owners of this vessel, and the sole purpose of our voyage. Begad, man, are you aware of what oil is fetching per ton back in Londontown? Do you not realize the treasure we have yonder? There is a fortune in her hold, and by all the laws of salvage that drifting derelict belongs to me. 'Tis the good hand of Providence."

The first mate was still not satisfied. "But sir, many of the men are superstitious—there will be talk and scuttlebutt. They'll fancy her a Jonah."

The captain began to grow impatient. "Then tell them naught. Set the first dog-watch, and be sure no one gets curious and boards her. At the crack of dawn we start shipping her cargo."

The first mate sighed in resignation. "Aye, Captain, I will see to it."

Captain Seabury watched him go, and relished one last long look at the swarthy, sinister hulk of the *Reaper*. Then he went below.

After a supper of crackerhash, prune pie and tea to wash it down, he met with the other officers to outline plans for the morrow's task of loading the considerable quantity of oil. Shortly before midnight, at seven bells, he returned to his quarters, lit a lamp, and poured himself a tot of run. Filling his pipe, he settled comfortably into a chair and opened the leather-bound book to a place dating nine days prior—where, strangely enough, he noticed, the handwriting changed altogether. The heading at the beginning of these newer entries, written in a refined, precise hand, pronounced at the top:

Ship The *Reaper* of New Bedford.

In the South Pacific Ocean, June, 1846.

Bearings, reckonings and other specifics were noted respectively. The daily accounts, however, were exceptionally long, more than a few pages in length. Then he realized this segment of the journal had actually been backdated, as if to catch up several days' neglected entries.

The *Jezebel* creaked and rocked lazily to the whim of the sea. So there, in the solemn tranquility of his cabin, Captain Seabury started to read.

And a most bizarre tale began to unfold . . .

The weather had held nicely, being fair but very hot. We were homeward bound at last after forty-two arduous months at sea, plowing the deep and farming its green pastures. And it had been a plentiful

harvest indeed, with our hold quite full. Thus the prospect of still one more whale was rather looked upon as a cup running over.

Way into the afternoon the cry was sounded: "There blooows!"—our lookout having glimpsed the familiar ten-to twelve-foot spray of air and moisture from the animal's blowhole, visible for up to six miles.

Without delay the bosun began supervising miscellaneous jobs on the deck, in anticipation of the kill. In jig-time three of the slim whaleboats had been launched into the water, six men to a boat, myself included, and we commenced rowing in the direction of the sighting. The boats were soon scudding across the wavelets, our second mate calling softly, "Spring on your oars, me hearties. Spring hard, I tell you!"

As we approached, he ordered the oars shipped and paddles brought out, which were quieter: for though a whale's vision and smell are poor, its hearing is acute. A flock of petrels skimmed the water in wide circles, eager to peck at whatever marine life might be clinging to the whale's back. Had the beast itself been feeding, or had it been spooked? If feeding, it would reappear in the general vicinity within thirty minutes or so; otherwise, it could swim for ten miles or better before resurfacing for air. Silent and tense with expectancy, we could simply wait and watch, floating like a cork on the immensity of the ocean, the sea and sky vague, warm reflections.

We did not have long to wait. All at once there was a yell from one of the boats, "He breaches!" as the surface erupted hereabout, the whale surging out of the sea in a mighty leap. It white-watered with a deafening sound and again submerged, but not before the mate could make a reasonable guess at how far the animal would travel under water, judging from the way its flukes were turned. It was a fairly sizable sperm, sixty-five feet at least, strangely mottled black and gray in color. He was an old ill-tempered bull, apparently aware of our presence and somewhat agitated as well.

Once more we were pulling on our oars. The harpooneer stood at the ready and braced himself against the clumsy cleat, harpoon in hand. It was a six-foot shaft connected to a thirty-inch iron rod, tipped with a razor-edged double-flue barb. During idle periods on ship these fellows incessantly checked their gear, recoiling lines, sharpening and resharpening harpoon and lance points, and the time of their preparation was at hand. The men in the other two boats positioned themselves also.

Suddenly, twenty feet away, there was a tumultuous crash as the whale surfaced squarely beneath the first mate's boat, cleaving it in twain and toppling some of the crew into the frothy, foaming water. Others clung perilously to the wreckage or lay trapped amidst the tangle of

cordage. Then it dipped forward, twice smashing its broad flukes down on the floundering men and flotsam with such force as to splinter the remnants like so much kindling, sending spray into our own boat. There was only one survivor, whom the other boat managed to reach.

The whale, obviously enraged, continued to rampage nearby, as if already in pain or fear. Our companion boat attempted to sink a harpoon—but one of the lines snagged as the thrashing brute moved off a short distance and abruptly sounded, carrying the boat down therewith and drowning all but two of the men, our captain being one of the latter.

When the whale resurfaced we were close by—near enough to immediately put wood to blackskin. The harpoon flashed straight down into the thick blubber and sank clear to its socket. The island of flesh trembled for a moment with shock. Then the harpooneer snatched up a second harpoon, this one tied to an inflated bladder which would tire the animal should it try to dive again, and was able to drive it to the hilt right beside the first one. He tossed out a hundred feet of half-inch manilla.

Quickly but carefully the harpooneer took over the steering oar while the second mate exchanged positions at the bow. And nary a second too soon, for now the harpoon line was whipping out of the boat. The wounded whale was off, the two harpoons buried in its flesh.

Wrapped around the snubbing post, the line became taut and the prow dipped into the water till there were only a few inches of freeboard. The second mate glanced back apprehensively and shouted, "You look out what you are about! Do not box the boat down too much—you may flip her."

The line whirled faster round the loggerhead until it started to smoke from the friction, so the nearest oarsman dipped water onto it, hatchet handy should it be necessary to cut the rope. Our quarry was running briskly but erratically, dragging us behind it at no less than twelve knots—the Nantucket sleigh ride.

Then, with a certain horror, we realized that the behemoth was bearing down on the *Reaper*. Recollections of oft-told tales went racing through our minds . . . the legendary depredations and malign intelligence of such solitary rogues as Mocha Dick, New Zealand Tom, and Timor Jack. Our ship could, in all likelihood, fall victim to its own prey. And at the present we were helpless.

Our fears began to materialize. The whale was obviously coming foul of the ship, as if to stave in her hull. At the crucial instant of impact, he slowed and swerved, grazing the vessel's keel with the side of its gigantic head and body, and shearing away part of the hull's copper sheathing as he went along and came to leeward. But by the life of us, it appeared the

leviathan had no ill-intent upon the ship as such, but was merely finding some sort of relief in scraping its hide against her broadside.

Yet the danger was in no ways past, for as the whale of a sudden nudged sharply amidships an astonished sailor engrossed in the excitement leaned too far over the rail and was knocked off balance, plunging headlong over the side. The poor devil fell in front of the monster and was swept directly into the creature's great jaw where the eight-inch-long teeth of the powerful bottom jaw clamped shut, crunching his hapless victim to pulp. It happened almost within the blinking of an eye.

With fresh advance we took hold of the line and rounded in slack, cautiously moving in for the *coup de grâce*. Although tiring quickly, in close quarters the beast could still crush us like an eggshell. Once within range the second mate unsheathed one of his lances, an eleven-foot spear with steel oval blade, and aimed for the vulnerable area behind the right flipper at approximately eye level. This was the life of the whale, whither the animal's massive arteries converged near its heart and lungs. With quick dexterity and skill the lance was given its critical, killing thrust, striking home and slicing with terrible efficiency through the windpipe. Thereupon the whale's lungs were flooded and the supply of blood to the heart dwindled.

"Stern all," our mate called again, and we backed the boat off to a safe distance. The whale briefly submerged, surfaced, and spouted a pinkish-red mist. "We have him now," someone exclaimed. "See—his chimney is afire!"

The death throes did not last long. After about five minutes he rolled dead on his side.

The crew wasted no time in lowering the slender scaffolds of the cutting-in stage over the whale and we pitched in to insert a chain through a slit cut in the flukes which were swung forward. Thither it was brought alongside, floating just awash. Having joined our shipmates on deck, we surveyed the inboards for damage, and found none other than the external layer of copper plating, designed to retard marine growth.

By then it was rapidly nearing sunset. Luckily, we were spared a grueling two to the ship. The whale was ours. But woe the cost, for the sea was haunted with the ghosts of eleven of our men.

The dying rays of the setting sun turned the bloodstained sea into a dark, shimmering rainbow of fire.

Before supper, our master (or "old man" as we referred to him among ourselves) proffered a prayer in memory of our dead mates. It was admittedly a harsh, dangerous, and often violent livelihood, he said, this existence on the unforgiving sea, long and far from family and friends.

But whalemens were a proud and stubborn lot, and pointed out that it was better for an old salt to be lost at sea caught up in the adventure that was his life, than to languish on land and perhaps pass away in a wretched sick-bed in some dismal, shuttered room. And for most of us his words rang true. The old man was in his late thirties or thereabouts, his face rugged yet aristocratic, and sporting an elegant beard. He had signed aboard in his early teens as a lowly cabin boy and gradually worked his way aft to the officer's quarters.

Whilst we weary oarsmen stole a few hours of sleep that night, our other crewmen finished arranging the equipment for the next two or three days' labor: processing the dead whale and rendering it into barrels of oil. The cumbrous iron kettles were uncovered and cleaned, kindling laid under them for when the blubber was ready to be boiled, and water was poured in the brick trough on the floor beneath the tryworks, to protect the wooden deck against the extreme temperatures.

In the early morning we were roused into action: "All hands ahoy! Tumble up and man the windlass! Nothin' but arses 'n elbows this day, mates!" So we each fell to our tasks with a will. We would toil around the clock in six-hour shifts amid an inferno of soot and flame, transforming the *Reaper* into a miniature floating factory.

Upon closer inspection, we soon ascertained that the whale was as peculiar physically as in its previous behavior toward the ship. It was not mottled in color at all—as we had originally perceived—but was partially covered with literally thousands of barnacles. Old battle scars, callouses, sucker-fish, sea-lice, and barnacles were a common sight on just about any whale, but to this degree was most extraordinary. Colonies of such crustacea were generally referred to by whalemens as "dead men's fingers," either owing to the stalked, fingerlike appearance in which they typically grew, or because of their rigid, deathlike grip.

At any rate, even though our former wind had lessened to a light breeze, the ship carried only enough canvas to maintain slight headway, to retard the vessel from drifting in circles and so the gentle forward motion would act to hold the heavy carcass in close to her hull.

The twenty-foot cutting spades were taken from their racks and several of the men set to flensing away huge blanket pieces of the foot-thick, yellowish mantle of fat under the moderately thin outer skin, to be impaled with a hook and hauled on board.

The old man and second mate kept a vigilant eye on everything, insuring that we sliced the blubber to the proper thickness, churned the cauldrons habitually to prevent any settling on the bottom, and making sure the blazing, sputtering fires were kept fueled to the highest intensity.

If anyone was caught shirking in his duties he received a good dressing down: "Show-a-leg there, buckos—this ain't no widow's walk!"

No regular meals were served, but rather we would take an occasional break for a smoke and snack of blubber cracklin's and biscuits dipped in salt water and fried in the oil, or fritters of minced whale meat mixed with potatoes.

The great number of barnacles proved to be a significant hindrance, oftentimes making it nigh impossible to chop into or through them, thereby frustrating our efforts to easily or practically get much of the blubber we sought and repeatedly causing it to tear as it was stripped. The whale was rolled over on its back and the mates wielded their spades with surgical precision to sever the lower jawbone, providing ivory from its colossal teeth. They managed to slash the massive vertebrae and decapitate the beast, employing block and tackle to raise the giant head to deck level near the gangway, so one of the hands could carefully dip out of the natural reservoir therein containing hundreds of gallons of spermacetti, a fine oil highly esteemed by New England candlemakers.

It was not until after noon when I noticed that the mutilated whale had attracted marauding sharks, as usual, but for some very strange reason they were hesitant to approach the carcass too closely—as if they were instinctively frightened of something. It was most puzzling. Yet this was not nearly so mysterious as what occurred late that night, when three of our men were killed in a singularly horrible manner.

The work progressed throughout the night, and by sunup dense clouds of smoke still veiled the rigging, the decks gleaming darkly with blood and grease, enormous masses of blubber scattered here and there. Oil hissed and sizzled in the try-pots, and the entire ship was enveloped in a cloying stench. During the night the listless breeze had virtually died away altogether, the sails scarcely off the masts, and left us stranded in a dead calm.

Sometime before noonday I was belowdecks assisting two other men in placing casks of cooled oil into stowage. We were working toward the bow, wrestling them to fill every nook and cranny. The hold was a confining, gloomy place, imprisoning odd odors and shadows. Suddenly one of the mates accidentally happened upon something behind several displaced barrels in an obscure corner, and his eyes nearly popped out of his head.

Stretched out in grotesque fashion were the corpses of three of our erstwhile shipmates, unmissed from an earlier shift. They had been ravaged beyond belief—barely recognizable for the men they once were.

One of my comrades tore his eyes from the sickening sight and peered intently into the deeper darkness. "Listen," he muttered, "—you hear somethin'?" I hearkened closely and probed the shadows for some sound or movement, but there was nothing stirring.

Anxious to get shy of these shuddersome surroundings, we forthwith notified the old man, who summoned everyone out except for the second mate. After much serious discussion and conjecture he had the sailmaker sew up the bodies—or what was left of them—in some spare canvas, and with quick, quiet ceremony conferred them to the ever-present sharks.

When evening came the *Reaper* drowsed sluggishly in the water, her mast tops towering toward the stars, the sea as black as basalt and smooth as glass. Only an occasional flying fish broke the surface, swiftly gliding off into the night as if in fear.

Perhaps they sensed our own.

About an hour before sunrise, myself and a number of others were awakened by a fearful howl from the second mate's cabin. He came lurching out, barefoot and clad only in trousers, holding one hand away from him with his other. And then we discerned that there was something round attached to the whole back part of his hand. Blood dribbled freely betwixt his fingers and slowly ran down his arm.

"I—I was in my bunk," he stammered, he stammered, his throat tight with fear, "an' I 'spect my arm was hanging out, touching the floor. I woke up feeling an awful pricklin', and found this—this thing on me."

We examined the object carefully. Every now and again it quivered slightly, as if securing itself more firmly in the mate's hand. After several moments it struck us as to why the thing seemed somewhat familiar . . . it was one of the barnacles that thronged our dead whale. But barnacles these obviously were not; just what they truly were, we had yet to learn.

The organism had plainly imbedded itself in the second mate's flesh. We endeavored to pull or pry it off, but the man winced and cried out in pain, unable to endure it. Various other opinions and suggestions were bandied about and tried in due course, such as applying heat to its shell (which prompted it only to dig deeper), yet none of these methods proved the least bit effective. Finally the old man took aside the chippy and spoke for his ears only. Momentarily he returned and gravely informed our second mate that it appeared the only solution to be quit of the creature and to keep him from slowly bleeding to death was to amputate his hand. This may have seemed a rather drastic measure, but as a result of our vain attempts to remove the thing, and the victim's increasing torment and revulsion, the mate reluctantly agreed.

We plied him with the old man's stoutest rum and ere long he lapsed

into a deep, drunken stupor. Forasmuch as we boasted no surgeon or formal doctor on board, the task was left to the butchery of the ship's cooper, or carpenter. When the deed was done the laceration was cauterized with a red-hot iron till the bleeding stopped, so it could be cleaned and dressed. He was carried back to his quarters to sleep it off.

The hand, still with its parasite, was then dropped into a burlap bag and placed in one of the pots of bubbling oil for a long while. When the creature was dead, the sack was discarded and the hand carved away until only the creature remained. We huddled round and studied it in detail.

It was comparatively small—that is, in relation to the others we had noticed on the whale, ranging in size from a man's fist to a large dinner plate, and semi-spherical in shape. It reminded me of a horseshoe crab without its tail. The shell was rough and incredibly resilient, thicker and tougher than a tortoise shell. Someone tried to cut it with a short mincing knife and could not. This chitinous mantle was strengthened by a lower one-half inch band of movable, shelly plates, probably its means of locomotion—a ring of rubbery cartilage from which sprouted sparse, stubby growths of bristle or hair, mayhap some sort of sensory apparatus. Despite the dense and rigid carapace of the creature it was remarkably light in weight.

The underside mouth parts of the animal functioned as a piercing organ, and our scrutiny disclosed a narrow but deep slit running lengthwise which housed several rows of sharp, serrated teeth. Surrounding it was moist, leathery tissue with what looked to be cement glands, and dozens of tiny needlelike claws, each tipped with barbs. On this particular specimen these could be extended as much as five centimeters and were unquestionably the source of its tenacious clinging and boring abilities.

With a skitter of gooseflesh we surmised that this surely explained the presumed rubbing motions of the whale against our hull, having been driven mad with pain. I dare say the longer we pondered the dark possibilities of this the more it seemed plausible. The sperm is primarily a deepwater dweller; its predilection for giant squid, some four hundred pounds and measuring five and fifty feet in length, lured them down more than one-half mile to feed, their awesome under-teeth enabling them to dislodge the squid from their rocky lairs at the bottom of the sea.

Even other whales, such as the slender gray, were known to have surfaced after foraging with their heads and lips besmeared with a murky ooze from the inky depths below. The faint sunlight would give way to utter blackness, and in the unfathomed realm of an eternal night who could guess what alien creatures lurked therein? There were all manner

of sea-floor scavengers, parasites, and suchlike; weird carnivores, primitive snails and other curiosities. The intestines of any whale might be teeming with as many as twenty different kinds of pelagic worms. So it was not improbable at all, then, that our stricken whale had perchance been made host by these odious denizens of the deep, conceivable like wandering through a nest of ticks or fleas.

In light of this revelation, and having stripped the whale of all we could in spite of its myriad "barnacles," we unchained the remains of our hard-earned prize and cast the carcass adrift. But with a trickle of terror we realized the tardiness of this action; for by this time the majority of the creatures had left the dead animal and were now firmly fastened to the bare wood of the vessel's starboard hull, a large portion of the protective copper sheathing having been torn off by the whale.

When another nightfall approached, an atmosphere of dread descended over the sullen ship like a funeral shroud.

The somber gray of dawn brought with it the discovery of two more of our men, both half-eaten. It was appalling. One of the crew members found them together on deck, under the midship shelter. It occurred to us that it was strange that five of our companions had met this gruesome end and yet no one heard an outcry or sounds of struggle. This happenstance led us to suspect that the unfortunate wretches were suddenly swarmed and helplessly covered with the creatures, or else perhaps some of the things possessed the capability to poison or stun their victims (possibly depending on their size or the area of the body whereto they affixed themselves). Or, as in the case of the second mate, they were clearly advantaged by his heavy slumber. Similarly, scuttling armies of cockroaches—some as much as an inch and a half long—frequently nibbled around the lips and beards of exhausted, sleeping sailors in quest of food residues. It was an exceedingly unpleasant speculation.

We again disposed of the corpses, then the old man had us swab down the decks with vinegar and salt water, and fumigate below with pans of burning pitch. However, this was obviously a fruitless gesture, of which we were all well aware, even the captain himself. A prodigious number of the creatures had already infested the ship itself, and during the warm daylight hours they apparently retreated to the dank shadows and more remote parts of the ship, being basically nocturnal in nature and hitherto accustomed to their twilight world beneath the sea.

In several such places we uncovered to our growing horror sticky clusters of what could only be egg deposits, somewhat comparable to a frog's eggsacks. We destroyed those we were actually able to ferret out, or dared to try. Moreover, a quick, tentative inspection of the hold

revealed a new crisis at hand: the things' rapacious appetites had compelled those which remained attached to the hull to burrow themselves deeply into the scantling, weakening the structure in spots and causing the ship to slowly take on water.

The crew grew increasingly morose and fretful, and after midday about half the men began milling together with renewed protests and murmuring. The crew of the *Reaper* was a diverse and rather motley collection: most were in their late teens, some, as I, were in their twenties, and a few, such as the old man, in their thirties; we represented numerous nationalities, including Spaniards, Swedes, Germans, Irishmen, Frenchmen, Italians, and a smattering of Pacific Islanders. And from every walk of life we were—adventurous gentlemen, reckless soldiers, discontented tradesmen; among us a failed Shakespearean actor, a homesick farmboy, a bankrupt Philadelphia hardware clerk, and even myself, a well-educated Kentuckian having given up on my profession as a newspaper reporter in order to “see the world.”

Presently the gathering ambled to the afterhouse, something most assuredly weighing on their minds, and converged toward the old man. The ship's helmsman, whom it was rumored was a British jailbird having escaped from a penal colony in Australia, stepped forward to address the captain. He was a brawny, bullying, “cock-o-the-walk,” but seemed to hold strong influence over some of the others.

“We chaps wish to 'ave a word wi' you, Cap'n,” he announced stonily.

The old man folded his arms and said nothing, waiting.

The other continued, “We been studyin' this—predicament, and seein' as 'ow we got no wind to make for land, think it would be best if we all evacuate the ship—leave 'er to these mis'erable buggers.”

The old man paled at this, being more a challenge than appeal, and swallowed hard. “I forbid it! This ship is under my command, as well as her crew—and I say no.”

“She won't be yours much longer,” the surly helmsman sneered, “'tween the sea and those critters.”

“We can overcome them, somehow—we must. We cannot carry these things with us to an inhabited port . . . you saw their eggs. They would multiply tenfold, continue to adapt, spawn and spread to other vessels, become a plague. Nor can we surrender the ship to them, leaving both an uncertain fate. No, we must keep our wits about us, exterminate them, and bide for a favorable wind. She will not founder if we can make good her course and set-to somewhere safe for repairs. Besides, consider your mates who have given their lives for the wealth in our hold. 'Twould be a crime—nay, a sin—to forsake it.”

"And pray tell what bloody use is any lay to those poor blighters dead since—eaten alive? or to us, about to join them?"

Several others piped in with raucous voices. The captain spotted his second mate amongst them. "You too, man? You side with these mischief makers?"

The second mate raised his already festering, bandaged stump. "Aye, Capt'n. I would gladly give meself over to the mercy of the drink afore I'd let those horrid devils touch me again."

"But we would be weeks at sea. The nearest coast is bounded by treacherous reefs and strong currents. 'Tis a hostile and uncivilized region—a rugged mountain wilderness. No ship anchors there if they can prevent it. There would be uncounted privations. 'Twould be lunacy, plain and simple, and I shan't allow it."

The old man managed to retain his outward composure and a frail façade of authority, but beneath his somewhat faltering speech I detected that he could not avoid being swept up in the same undercurrent of dismay washing over most of the crew. Our good captain, once God Almighty of the quarter-deck, was quickly losing control of his men.

The group's leader gave him one last, long, ugly, look—and absently fondling his sheath-knife, I noticed—then turned and stormed off. Hereupon the others likewise dispersed, still grumbling.

This aura of tense unrest lingered through the rest of the afternoon, escalating fatefully just before sunset when the brooding silence was shattered by a bloodcurdling scream from the galley. With a prick of panic we rushed to its source and found the cookie shrieking in agony, his eyes wide circles of fear. He was flailing his arms and clawing mindlessly at one of the creatures—a very big one—which was feasting on the side of his face. For a second we were all agog, smitten by the horror of the spectacle, until the helmsman, whose chum he was, leapt forward to seize the fiendish creature with both hands, and with all his might wrenched it off of its victim. Tragically, in so doing the thing took with it a third of the cook's face, exposing raw white bone. His eyes rolled up in the back of his head, his face dripping gore and his mouth gaping open in shock. He fell to his knees, tottered a moment, then collapsed to hit the floor with a ghastly sound. He twitched once or twice and lay still.

The monster had landed on its back a few feet away, and the enraged helmsman grabbed a meat cleaver and viciously hacked at the underside of the creature till it was quite dead. Just then we glimpsed another of the things darting off into the scraps of the shadows, suggesting a surprising mobility more akin to a crab or spider than a snail. Conversely, they also moved slowly and silently, almost as if stealthily stalking their

prey, and could climb upon people or objects without at first being perceived, especially at night.

During the whole of this disaster the old man stood frozen in the background, drugged with the terror of it, saying and doing nothing. The contemptuous helmsman shot him another withering glare, and coldly brushed past him.

That evening the captain doubled the watch, delegating two of his more faithful, older hands, and gave them specific instructions to alert him straightaway if there were any signs of trouble from the disgruntled crew members. The situation was deteriorating rapidly, and things began to look bleak indeed.

Of late we had come to expect the worst, and the following morning brought with it still more reason for our mounting consternation. We found that the two guards were assaulted sometime during the wee hours before light, and the half-dozen men who constituted the preceding day's assemblage had furtively jumped ship. Apparently the two on duty tried to enforce the old man's order, for one of them had been dealt a cruel blow from behind with a belaying pin, killing him instantly, intentional or no. The other was pretty bad off due to a dagger wound to the chest. The fellow nearly bled to death and we had difficulty in keeping the bleeding at check. He was more unconscious than not, and his recovery seemed doubtful.

The conspirators left further evidence of their departure, inasmuch as the two remaining whaleboats—in addition to the spare—had been quietly but thoroughly sabotaged. Whether this malicious act was perpetrated to spite the old man or to thwart later probable charges of mutiny and the gallows dance, I could not say for certain. Someone also discovered our stores of victuals and fresh water had been ransacked, as well as assorted and sundry articles pilfered from the supply lockers.

I felt the captain had painted an accurate picture of the ultimate futility of abandoning ship in these waters, and had no doubt but that the scoundrels would all perish long before ever they could gain safety; notwithstanding, such was of little consolation in view of our own plight. There was no practical means of combating these loathsome creatures and they grew bolder day by day. Neither can we hope to mend one of the boats and ourselves escape if needs be, for the carpenter was among the recent victims, and obviously would have been unable to salvage the boat anyway.

As if in further mockery, about three o'clock in the afternoon a light but freshening westerly found us, after almost four days' flat calm. But of course now we were even more seriously undermanned, being just six

of us left, and hardly enough to operate the ship efficiently for any prolonged period of time. I took it upon myself to hoist aloft the appropriate distress flags.

We ate a meager meal at sunset, and by and by headed each to our quarters—three of the hands to the forecandle, the old man to his cabin, and I to the former first mate's cabin which I had recently occupied at the captain's permission. I was about to retire for the evening when I heard a muffled, broken moaning from the lazaret, where we had situated the injured man. Procuring a taper, I proceeded to investigate.

When I peered inside, my stomach turned to ice, for the poor fellow was on the floor verily covered with the creatures—all sizes—as they fell to devouring him alive, moving hungrily about like so many maggots. Inevitably they were lured by the scent of his blood, and now it was too late. Powerless to avail him, I spun and fled, shamefully relieved we had isolated him from the rest of us and shut off that particular section of the vessel. Then I related my grisly discovery to the captain. He made no reply, only sat staring at me blankly, eyes like drab marbles, his face drawn, haggard, and very ashen. He looked as if he had aged fifty years. I left him to his dark imaginings and hurried to my own room, where I eventually managed to obtain a few hours of fitful, troubled sleep.

After the sun was well up the next day I warily ventured back to the scene of the previous night's horror, and found the man's fresh white skeleton, picked quite clean. Upon finishing their ghoulish feast the creatures had, fortunately, vanished elsewhere. I disposed of the grim remains over the side, then came to realize with a shudder that I was the only one up and about. I went below, forward to the forecandle where the other three hands were quartered.

It was dark and musty, as most of the hatches leading up to the light and fresh air were battened down. I approached the doorway cautiously and with a heightening sense of apprehension resolved not to enter the compartment, but merely called out loudly to my mates. There was no answer from within save for a tell-tale scurrying noise. I backed away, noticing for the first time on the floor at my feet the multitudes of sluglike tracks and slimy trails of bloody mucus extending off in all directions.

With skin suddenly acrawl, I retreated quickly and returned aft, bringing myself up to the old man's cabin door. Knocking repeatedly, calling to him in a tone of growing alarm, he finally responded. He sounded distracted, distant and hoarse, betraying a note of terrified resignation beyond despair.

"Go away!" he croaked. "Leave me be."

"But sir," said I, "you did not answer, and the others . . ."

"I am fine," he snapped, his voice rising to an angry tremor. "—Begone with you!"

Confused and concerned, I withdrew to my cabin for the remainder of the day, feeling increasingly helpless, a chilling and forlorn weight upon my shoulders. Then, at about dusk, I was startled by the loud report of a pistol from the old man's stateroom, and frantically bolted through the main cabin into his sleeping quarters. My shock was complete when I found him on his berth, having just put a ball of lead through his brain. Blood was everywhere and almost at once I detected a movement to my right, turning so to encounter not one but several of the creatures scuttling swiftly through his cabin toward where the dead man lay.

Fully fearing now for my own life, I fled to my cabin and thought quickly. Doubtless these demons would soon be upon me as well, lest I acted shrewdly and with haste. This room had no door, but rather a makeshift curtain that could be drawn. With desperation born of fear, I struck on the idea of prying loose my bunk and positioned its frame and pallet upright across the doorway. It was a thin and relatively flimsy obstacle, though I pushed a heavy sea-chest against it for additional support.

Wiping my brow of the perspiration there, like warm rivulets of fear, I became painfully cognizant of how cramped and inadequate my refuge was, and somehow cold as a crypt.

The night slowly ebbed away, merciless in its eternity. I am the lone survivor of an entire crew of able-bodied men, and a hideous death creeps on the other side of my temporary barricade. In these long, darkling hours I have screwed up my courage and set to pondering as objectively as possible my dire state of affairs, ever mindful of the fearsome skittering and chewing sounds issuing from immediately outside my cabin. We have inadvertently brought these accursed creatures up from the bottom of the sea, and there appears to be no alternative but to send them back whence they came. My plan is simple yet perilous. If, at dawn's first light, I can dash across the galley and the length of the steerage, and can hurl a well-aimed, burning oil-lamp into the blubber room, the greasy try-works will ignite instantly and burn fiercely, the conflagration hopefully consuming everything on her before she goes down. And, saints willing, I can escape speedily up through the main hatch and take some substantial jetsam overboard with me onto which I can cling.

Our first mate kept the ship's log, and since his death the old man had assigned me to keep the daily entries, my being learned of books. I have been previously too preoccupied by the calamity of the past few days to

do so, but now bring everything to date, and leave this journal as both witness and warning, in the event something goes awry. I pray no one ever need find this, that I am successful in my mission and the *Reaper* is consigned to her watery grave.

Alas, I feel the time has come. I go now, to do what must be done.

In his gloomy cabin aboard *Jezebel*, Captain Seabury finished reading this last line of script and slowly closed the log. Morbid recollections of the pitiful skeleton at the foot of the steerage companionway, with the shattered oil-lamp beneath it, flickered ominously in the dark recesses of his mind. And now he comprehended with dawning horror the full implications of the strange account he had just read. The night had almost slipped by, like a thief, unnoticed. In less than two hours it would be daybreak, the men preparing to transfer the oil from the *Reaper*. He was but a fool—damn the oil! Orders must be given immediately to torch the nightmare ship and cast loose before it was too late.

All at once he heard a terrified scream from somewhere on board his own ship, touching every inch of his body with fear. This was promptly followed by another, and then he cleared the paralyzing fog in his head long enough to realize that this second came from his own throat.

Indeed, for something large, wet, and cold was slowly crawling up his leg . . .

Dead Week

Leonard Carpenter

Born in Chicago in 1948, Leonard Carpenter grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area and attended college at Berkeley—an experience which furnished the background to “Dead Week.” Says Carpenter: “There’s a certain pressurized intensity to student life, when we’re still finding out whether we’re viable human beings or not, which all of us share to some extent. It’s a time of great discovery and of great dread; I hope the story conveys it.”

“Dead Week” is Carpenter’s first professional sale, followed by “The Ebbing” in Writers of the Future. Just now he is under contract to write new Conan novels for Tor Books; his first two, Conan the Renegade and Conan the Raider, have recently come out. Carpenter now lives with his wife and twin daughters in Santa Maria, California. He hopes to make writing a full-time career.

FROM 6:00 P.M. until 11:00 P.M., Cassy slept the sleep of the hunted. She awoke still dressed, stiff and cold on her cot, and lay for a long time in a semicomatose state watching the ghosts of car lights creep across the ceiling.

Sleeping odd hours was a method she used to cope with her roommates’ erratic study habits, and their taste for bluegrass music played loud and long. Now the house below her was finally quiet. The long night lay ahead for a last-ditch effort to prepare for finals next week.

Cassy couldn’t understand why no one else ever needed to study. Between her full load of classes, the cafeteria job to supplement her meager scholarship, and the lab requirements for the advanced biology program, she had no time left. The endless talking, socializing, and kicking back that the others engaged in were luxuries she couldn’t afford. By accepting a steep increase in rent she had managed to get a room to herself—not a room really, just a cramped vestibule atop the back stairway, probably rented out in violation of fire regulations. But she needed it to study in peace.

Her first task, the one she had been dreading, was to clean off her desk. It was an unexplored drift of papers reflecting the disorder of her own mind—books, lecture notes, handouts, reading lists, and who-knew-what-else dumped there in moments of exhaustion during the semester. Now she would need to review all her course requirements in order to cram efficiently. She dragged herself up, switched on the naked bulb overhead, plugged in her coffee pot, and went to work.

The job went faster than she expected. Most of the papers could be arranged by course number and date or thrown away. The notes were legible, if sparse, and she had really only fallen behind in her reading a few weeks before—so maybe things weren't so bad.

Then she found something. Near the bottom of the mess was a pink, printed card with the hours and days of a week blocked out like a calendar, bearing the motto "Courtesy of the Berkeley Student Bookstore." The card itself wasn't strange—the times of Cassy's classes, labs, and work shifts were sketched into it with the care of someone mapping out a glorious new life, long before it turned into a murderous routine.

The strange thing was that on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons at 3:00 P.M.—right in the middle of her cherished library study time—were penciled blocks labeled "Demo 168."

It looked like her writing, but it puzzled her. She certainly wasn't taking any courses in demonology. Maybe it was demolitions—she laughed, thinking that would make a good poli-sci course. On an impulse she picked up her dog-eared schedule and directory and thumbed through the alphabetical listings. There it was, in tiny computer print, underscored in red pencil. "Demography Dept.—Demo 168—133 Dwinelle Hall—TTh 3."

Intrigued and a little disturbed, she plunged into the thick yellow course catalog. "Demography 168. 3 units. The Limits of Population. An exploration of the theoretical and practical limits to population growth, with special emphasis on the roles of birth and death controls in restoring equilibrium. Professors Thayer and Munck."

Slowly, with the elusive quality of a dream, it came back to her. She had indeed considered taking the course in February, nearly five months before. She'd even attended one or two lectures. The subject had sounded interesting—and relevant, she had thought, to the populations of microbes she would be working with in bio. She'd heard that it was a smart precaution to sign up for extra classes in case your first preferences were too crowded.

But the professor had indicated that the course would focus on human

populations, using a social-science approach. That was the main reason Cassy had dropped it.

At least she seemed to recall dropping it. She began hunting through the desk drawers. There it was—the green carbon copy of the enrollment card, signed by her faculty advisor. As she read it her heart plunged and her fingertips felt numb. It listed five courses; the fifth one was Demo 168.

But that was crazy! How could she be taking a course without even knowing it? She was sure she hadn't bought any of the texts—at some point she must have just stopped attending and forgotten all about it.

Frantically she searched through the last of the clutter on the desktop. A single sheet, mimeographed in pale purple, came to light. It read, "Demography 168—Course Requirements. The grade will be based sixty percent on the final exam and forty percent on the term paper, to be handed in at the last class meeting. Lecture attendance is recommended. Required reading: *Man against the Ceiling* by Storvich and Smith, Sutton House, 1973; *The Dynamics of Death Control* by E. C. Festung, 1978 ed.; *Sower and Reaper* by G. Hofstaedler, Vendome, 1979. Additional readings to be assigned periodically."

Cassy felt a great, sinking despair. The chance of catching up so late in the semester was nil. She would have to request some kind of administrative relief. Whether it would affect her scholarship, she didn't know.

There was certainly nothing to be done so late at night—and no one she could talk to. She tried to study for other classes, but thoughts of the phantom class kept twisting through her brain. As the night dragged on she accomplished nothing more. Sleep was unattainable.

The most upsetting thing was the realization of her own mental lapse—somehow, under all the demands and stress, her mind had slipped gears. Was it the first time? Would it be the last?

The Berkeley campus seemed deserted the following day as Cassy walked to the Admin Building. Dead Week, students called it—week of anguished repentance for thoughtless months of procrastination. The sky was steely gray with the fog that can make San Francisco Bay summers colder than its winters. Swishing sprinklers transected the lawns.

Cassy's route passed Barrows Hall, the eight-story math building. She involuntarily glanced at the demolished shrub where a grad student had dived from the roof a few days before. He had been the second suicide to choose the boxlike building this term, the fourth this school year. They were keeping the roof doors locked now.

Sproul Hall loomed impassive on the left, seemingly built of sugar cubes. The plaza wasn't deserted—its bizarre bazaar never ceased. Two die-hard disc throwers, a vagrant guitar player, a revivalist preacher ranting to nobody, and an odd assortment of street people were all doing their things. Cassy hurried through. Somehow the sight of the anonymous social transactions taking place here only intensified her loneliness.

Cassy had friendships, of course—smooth working relationships with the people in her major, her job, and her house. But she felt there was some kind of sustenance she wasn't getting. She knew that she didn't fit the conventional beauty standard; the schoolkid puns about "Cassy's chassis" had stopped being funny after her chassis became a little too stout for most boys' liking. And though she had definitely and finally determined that she was not "pig-faced," it was depressing to have to remind herself of it each time she looked into a mirror.

Not that she wanted a delirious romance. Her schedule didn't allow for it. Summer loomed ahead, with two accelerated class sessions, more hours at the cafeteria, and a visit or possibly two with her mom. She would have liked to do more dating and partying, but lately the guys who approached her always seemed a little slimy. "Let's talk about you," they said; "Tell me about yourself"—willing to give only as much as they absolutely had to. Their attention shifted too easily. The latest one, Howie, had been that way. He had left a message for her a few weeks ago, but she had forgotten to return his call.

Inside Sproul Hall there were long lines at the administration window in spite of Dead Week—students fighting their bureaucratic battles to the bitter end. No one in her line said anything to her; Cassy vainly opened up her biochem text and stared at the chapter on protein synthesis.

When her turn came she tried to explain her situation. The clerk, a bored girl who looked younger than Cassy herself, pointed to an orange bulletin under the glass countertop. "I'm sorry, the last day to add or drop classes was March third."

"But I never really took this class. I mean, I didn't mean to!" She felt herself getting in deeper. "I don't need it . . . I only took it by mistake."

"I'm sorry. The only way to drop now would be to withdraw from the University." The girl peered over Cassy's shoulder to summon the next one in line.

"But that's impossible . . . my other classes. My scholarship! I want to talk to someone else, please."

"You could ask the instructor for a grade of Incomplete."

"Please let me talk to someone else."

"Very well, you'll have to make an appointment to see the dean. His office is on the second floor, in front of you as you leave the stairwell. Next."

After waiting in the dean's anteroom and making an appointment for the following day, Cassy didn't have time to go home before her work shift. Instead she went to the Graduate Social Sciences Library in Stevens Hall. There, at the back of a yellow-lit aisle in the soundless stacks, she was able to find one of the books on the Demo 168 reading list, the Festung text. It was a hardcover maroon volume two inches thick, and it looked as if no one had ever opened it. The glossy pages were densely printed, with graphs of sociological data.

The chapter titles made it sound pretty heavy. "Nature's Inexorable Balance," "Death Controls Versus Human Ingenuity," "The Pathology of Crowding," "The Role of the Unconscious," and so on. The graphs dealt mainly with crime rates and deaths from various causes as functions of population density, in an endless series of uptailing curves. The prose was impenetrable—written in Berkeleyese, a pretentious academic style that tries earnestly to make itself immune to all criticisms and ends up qualifying itself into meaningless obscurity.

Typical social sciences material, Cassy thought. There was no hope of making sense of it without the lectures and the teacher's help, if she did end up having to do the coursework.

That was one reason Cassy had majored in biology. It has no shortage of cumbersome facts and figures to grapple with, but there was also the laboratory work—real, concrete procedures that could show the truth or untruth of the theories in solid, life-or-death terms. She was good in the lab, and it was largely on the strength of this aptitude that she'd been accepted into the advanced bio program.

Of course, it had put unexpected demands on her time and cut into her other activities—but she didn't mind. It made her feel good to be valued as a researcher. Much of it was routine work and errand-girl stuff—growing and feeding cultures, caring for test animals, and delivering specimens—still, she was learning a great deal about immunology research. Some of it was quite advanced; she suspected that the lab programs were tied to defense—though her instructors would never admit that, with the current sentiment on campus.

Returning home in a haze of fatigue, Cassy cut across the grassless front lawn and climbed the porch steps of her house. It was a worn, gaudily-painted Victorian perched on a roaring one-way street. The front

door stood open and an acrid smell drifted out. She headed down the hall, past the communal kitchen, and heard voices raised.

"There she goes now." It was an angry-sounding female, Vickie or Connie, speaking from one of the rooms. An intense murmur interrupted her, and then the voice shrilled, "Well, somebody's got to tell the creep!"

Cassy turned as Dave's tee-shirted figure, built square for soccer, appeared in the kitchen doorway. His face was set grimly. "Cassy, come here." He jerked his head in the direction of the kitchen.

Cassy complied. Dave stepped back to reveal the room. The acrid smell was heavier here, and the ceiling was smoke-stained. The blackened, ill-scrubbed stove with scorched and blistered cabinets above it resembled an altar.

"We had the fire department here this morning, Cassy," Dave said. "After you left. Did you forget to turn off the burner?"

Cassy felt numb, confused. "Well, maybe . . . I'm not sure . . ."

"Sure she did." Vickie, dressed in tight jeans and Dave's sweatshirt, came through the door that joined their room to the kitchen. "It was her crap piled up on the stove that caught fire. If Bruce hadn't smelt it, we would've all burned to death in our sleep." She thumped across the floor in bare feet and confronted Cassy. "What's with you anyway?"

"I'm sorry . . ." Cassy had only a vague recollection of her hurried breakfast of coffee, toast, and donuts. "I've been so busy lately . . ."

"Busy—jeez!" Vicki threw up her hands violently. "We could be dead right now, and you're busy!" She rolled her eyes ceilingward. "How do we know you won't do it again tomorrow? You sneak around here, and never talk to anybody . . ."

Dave put a hand on her shoulder, gingerly. "Vickie, I think she gets the idea."

"Butt out, Dave." Vickie twisted out from under his hand and went on, "You stay up all night. You know, we can hear you moving around up there. When you walk back and forth, it makes the whole house creak."

Cassy reddened. "Well, that's better than some of the things I've heard coming from your room!" She turned and started down the hall.

Vickie ran out of the kitchen after her. "Bullshit! You almost burned us alive! You leave your coffee grounds all over—and the weird stuff you eat takes up most of the space in the fridge!"

Dave was physically restraining her. "That's enough, Vick."

"I don't care," she screamed. As Cassy started up the back stairs, Vickie was yelling, "Why don't you just move out!"

Next day Cassy sat in the office of Dean Moody while he thumbed

through her master file. Over his shoulder, visible through the venetian blind, the soaring ivory tower of the Campanile chimed out eleven o'clock. He looked up and pinched his clean-shaven lips into a smile.

"Just an oversight, you say? Well, whatever the cause, I think we can make an exception in view of your excellent academic record. It can be written up as a late drop for health reasons. All that will be required are the signatures of the instructor and your faculty advisor." He took a card from his desk drawer, filled it in partially, and handed it to her. "You can turn it in at the window downstairs."

Cassy had no difficulty getting the signature of her advisor, Professor Langenschiedt. He was so busy between the affairs of the Medical Physics Department and the Academic Senate that he scarcely listened to her explanation before expressing every confidence in her good judgment, signing the form, and hurrying her out.

The approval of the course instructor was another matter. Cassy had some uneasiness about approaching him to tell him she'd lost interest in his class. Every academician takes his job seriously; she didn't really suppose that he'd consider her case important enough to warrant withholding his signature, but she anticipated an unpleasant encounter.

She had reconstructed a fairly clear mental picture of Professor Thayer from the beginning of the term: tall, tweedy, with squared-off tortoiseshell glasses and gray hair sculptured around his brow. His lectures had been dry and dispassionate, giving no hint of his general disposition.

She looked up his office number and went in search of it. Her quest took her through the cavernous lobby of Dwinelle Hall and into its dim, labyrinthine recesses. In building the hall and adding Dwinelle Annex, the designers had violated some basic law of architectural geometry, or else one of human perception. Angular corridors and half-flights of stairs created baffling and often frightening missteps for those who ventured inside. The sickly-brown light reflecting off the floor added to the eerie effect. But after many detours and hesitations, Cassy found the indicated door, number 1521, and knocked. "Come in!"

As she opened the door a flood of daylight came through, so that she could see only the outline of the man behind the desk. The tall window looked out on a tree-filled quadrangle, and the north wall opposite was bright with sun.

Professor Thayer closed the book before him and motioned Cassy to a chair. "Hello, Miss . . . uh, I'm pleased to see you. Aren't you in one of my classes?"

"Well, yes I was . . . I mean I am. That's sort of what I needed to talk to you about. I stopped going after the second lecture."

"Why, that's funny—I thought I'd seen you more than that. I recognize your bangs."

Cassy blushed. Although she had been busy all day formulating excuses, they evaporated now. Cassy told him simply and truthfully what had happened. There was something so reassuring in his manner that she went into more detail that she had done with anyone, and she finished with a lump in her throat. She took the drop card out of her book bag and placed it on his desk.

Professor Thayer nodded at it, but didn't seem in any hurry to sign.

"Tell me," he asked, "how many units are you taking?"

"Fifteen. Besides your class, I mean."

"That's quite a load. You also work part-time?"

"Yes sir. At the Meals Facility. And my lab requirement is six hours a week, but I usually spend more time than that." Cassy didn't mean to sound abject, but somehow she didn't feel like holding anything back.

"You must be under great stress. I can see how it might cause, uh, a slip of the kind you describe." He smiled. "Of course I'll be glad to sign your card." But instead of reaching for it, the professor folded his arms, leaned back in his chair, and began to profess.

"It's a shame, in a way, that you couldn't have taken my class. It would have given you some insight into a problem that's affecting you—and affecting us all, whether we know it or not.

"The course deals with overpopulation. It's been controversial in the Demography Department, since it probably should be called a sociology or population-ecology course instead; some of my colleagues don't approve of my taking what amounts to a moral stance, by saying just how much population is too much. But since the class deals specifically with human society, and most of the data are here, I've kept it in the department.

"We explore the correlation of increased population density with all the classes of effects—from high rents to disrupted living conditions, stress, violent crime, suicide, *et cetera*. One of the key factors at work is *anomie*—the insecure, faceless 'lonely crowd' feeling discussed by Durkheim and Riesman. It's hard to define an emotion like that scientifically, but it's easy to see its results; they fill the front pages of our newspapers—with gruesome statistics." Professor Thayer prodded a fat green softcover volume of census figures at the side of his desk, so that it flopped shut of its own weight.

"Of course, when you're discussing overpopulation, there's no better example of it than the student body of a large school like Berkeley. In this case, the population pressure is artificial—resulting from the crush

of students to a favored institution—but it's intense enough to develop all the classic effects: high rents, crowded living conditions, the overload of facilities, and above all, stress. An interesting microcosm." Professor Thayer gazed speculatively at Cassy for a moment, then resumed.

"The intriguing approach is to view all these social problems not just as ill effects, but as attempts by a dynamic system to balance itself. Death controls, in E. C. Festung's phrase.

"When a population exceeds natural limits, it definitely will be reduced—if not by birth control, then by death controls such as famine and disease. The human species is uniquely fortunate in having the power to choose—though we don't seem to be using that power.

"Festung identified a wide range of behaviors peculiar to man as death controls: war, terrorism, violent crime, transportation accidents, cult suicides, nuclear 'events' "—the professor drew imaginary brackets around the word with two pairs of fingers—"all the unique disasters we take for granted today. He maintains that they all stem from an instinct, inborn in mankind far beneath the level of rational thought, to reduce a population that, unconsciously, we perceive as too large. Like caged birds in the five-and-dime pecking each other to death. In effect, crowding is seen to induce irrational and aggressive behavior. A fascinating theory." This time his pause was punctuated by the sound of sparrows chirping outside in the quad.

"Unfortunately, it all tends to sound very morbid. Many students can't work with it—too depressing. They'd rather just shrug it off, at least until it becomes too big to ignore. Like so many contemporary issues, it's a hard one to face—I've seen some fine minds become paralyzed by a sort of ecological despair." He massaged his chin a moment. "In a way, your little bout of forgetfulness parallels the attitude of all Western society toward the population issue, ever since the time of Malthus. The initial warnings were just too grim, so we thrust it away to the back of our minds. Unfortunately that doesn't alleviate the problem."

The professor lapsed into silence and stared out the window for a while, hands folded. Then he bestirred himself and looked at his watch. "Oh my, I see I've run on for quite a while. You ended up taking my course anyway—the special condensed version. Hope I didn't bore you. Or depress you. Here, I'll sign this."

In a few moments Cassy was being ushered out the door. She didn't regret having spent so long with Professor Thayer. He was cute, though long-winded—and a lot of what he said sounded awfully unscientific.

Leaving Dwinelle she headed for the lab. After that, home, to do some serious cramming!

So Dead Week ended, if not quite happily, then at least hurriedly. Although the menace of the phantom class was laid to rest, Cassy knew that the distraction and delay had hurt her study effort—perhaps seriously. So she halved her sleep time and doubled her coffee intake to catch up, and in a while agony faded to mere numbness. Perhaps it didn't matter anyway—she had always found that final grades bore no recognizable relationship to her effort of understanding.

To complicate matters, there was a flurry of last-minute activity at the lab. An ill-timed biochemical breakthrough had Cassy making special trips around the campus to deliver files and samples when she should have been doing a dozen other things. In the department she sensed excitement and an unspoken pressure to keep the matter quiet—if not permanently, then at least until summer break, when the majority of the students would have gone home and the chance of protest lessened.

On Wednesday the lunch crowd in the Meals Facility was only slightly smaller than usual. A few of the diners moved with the sanctified air of having finished their final exams; others carried stacks of books on their trays and looked haggard. Cassy stood behind the counter doling out portions of stew, chicken, and enchiladas.

A familiar face appeared in the customer line. "Hello, Professor Thayer," she said brightly.

"Why, hello, Cassy! Oh, that's right—you told me you worked here, didn't you?" The professor put on a playfully pensive look. "Hmmm. I wonder what's good today."

"Everyone's having the Caesar salad," said Cassy, smiling. "It ought to be good—I helped make it." She reached for a clean bowl and began to dish up an especially generous helping.

At that moment she noticed the Erlenmeyer flask right there before her—from the lab. It was nearly empty of bacterial toxins, type K. It really didn't look much different from the salad dressing cruet—but that was over on the table by her purse, and it was still full. Again that lightheaded feeling, of gears slipping somewhere.

Cassy and the professor heard a tray crash and looked out across the expanse of tables. Something was happening. A man near the window lurched, fell across a table, and rolled to the floor. There were violent movements elsewhere in the room, and out on the terrace.

Then the screaming began.

The Sneering

Ramsey Campbell

Ramsey Campbell has been a regular in The Year's Best Horror Stories since the first volume. Since his first book in 1964, a collection of Lovecraftian stories entitled The Inhabitant of the Lake & Less Welcome Tenants, Campbell has developed his own distinctive style of intensely introspective horror fiction. In recent years he has frightened readers with novels (The Face That Must Die, Incarnate, Obsession), short story collections Dark Companions, Cold Print, and as editor of anthologies (Superhorror, New Terrors I and II).

Born in Liverpool on January 4, 1946, Campbell now lives in Merseyside, where he continues to find unsuspected horrors in his native city. Perhaps more than anyone else, Campbell represents the new generation of horror writers who had paid their dues long before the recent boon in the genre's popularity. Campbell's latest books include a novel from Macmillan, The Hungry Moon; a collection of erotic horror stories from Scream/Press, Scared Stiff; and a third of an original anthology from Dark Harvest, Night Visions 3. He is currently at work on a new supernatural novel, The Influence.

WHEN THEY'D COME home the house had looked unreal, dwarfed by the stalks of the streetlamps, which were more than twice as tall as any of the houses that were left. Even the pavement outside had shrunk, chopped in half by the widened roadway. Beneath the blazing orange light the house looked like cardboard, a doll's house; the dark green curtains were black now, as if charred. It didn't look at all like his pride. "Isn't it nice and bright," Emily had said.

Bright! Seen from a quarter of a mile away the lights were ruthlessly dazzling: stark fluorescent stars pinned to the earth, floating in a swath of cold-orange light watery as mist. Outside the house the light was at least as bright as day; it was impossible to look at the searing lamps.

Jack lay in bed. The light had kept him awake again, seeping through the curtains, accumulating thickly in the room. The curtains were open

now; he could see the lower stretch of a towering metal stalk, gleaming in the July sunlight. Progress. He let out a short breath, a mirthless comment. Progress was what mattered now, not people.

Not that the lights were the worst. There was the incessant jagged chattering and slow howling of machinery: would they never finish the roadworks? They'd finish a damn sight faster if they spent less time idling, telling vulgar jokes, and drinking tea. And when the men had sneaked off home there was still the traffic, roaring by past midnight, past one o'clock, carrying the racket of passengers, shouting drunkenly and singing—the drivers too, no doubt: they didn't care, these people. Once or twice he'd leapt out of bed to try to spot the numbers of the cars, but Emily would say, "Oh, leave them. They're only young people." Sometimes he thought she must walk about with her eyes shut.

The machinery was silent. It was Sunday. The day of rest, or so he'd been brought up to believe. But all it meant now was an early start for the cars, gathering speed on the half-mile approach to the motorway: cars packed with ignorant parents and their ill-spoken children, hordes of them from the nearby council estate. At least they would be dropping their litter in the country, instead of outside his house.

He could hear them now, the cars, the constant whirring, racing past only to make way for more. They sounded as if they were in the house. Why couldn't he hear Emily? She'd got up while he was asleep, tired out by wakefulness. Was she making him a pot of tea? It seemed odd that he couldn't hear her.

Still, it was a wonder he could hear anything over the unmannerly din of traffic. The noise had never been so loud before; it filled the house. Suddenly, ominously, he realized why. The front door was open.

Struggling into his dressing-gown, he hurried to the window. Emily was standing outside the shop across the road, peering through the speckled window. She had forgotten it was Sunday.

Well, that was nothing to worry about. Anyone could forget what day it was, with all this noise. It didn't sound like Sunday. He'd best go and meet Emily. It was dim in the pedestrian subway, her walk wasn't always steady now; she might fall. Besides, one never knew what hooligans might be lurking down there.

He dressed hastily, dragging clothes over his limbs. Emily stood hopefully outside the shop. He went downstairs rapidly but warily: his balance wasn't perfect these days. Beneath the hall table with its small vase of flowers, an intruding ball of greasy paper had lodged. He poked it out with one foot and kicked it before him. The road could have it back.

As he emerged he heard a man say, "Look at that stupid old cow."

Two men were standing outside his gate. From the man's coarse speech he could tell they were from the estate. They were staring across the road at Emily, almost blocking his view of her. She stood at the edge of the pavement, at a break in the temporary metal fence, waiting for a chance to cross. Her mind was wandering again.

He shoved the men aside. "Who are you frigging pushing?" demanded the one who'd spoken—but Jack was standing on tiptoe at the edge of the traffic, shouting, "Emily! Stay there! I'm coming! Emily!"

She couldn't hear him. The traffic whipped his words away, repeatedly shuttered him off from her. She stood, peering through a mist that stank of petrol, she made timid advances at gaps in the traffic. She was wearing her blue leaf-patterned dress; gusts from passing cars plucked at it. In her fluttering dress she looked frail as a gray-haired child.

"Stay there, Emily!" He ran to the subway. Outside his gate the two men gaped after him. He clattered down the steps and plunged into the tunnel. The darkness blinded him for a moment, gleaming darkly with graffiti; the chill of the tiled passage touched him. He hurried up the steps on the far side, grabbing the metal rail to quicken his climb. But it was too late. Emily had crossed to the middle of the roadway.

Calling her now would confuse her. There was a lull in the traffic, but she stood on the long concrete island, regaining her breath. Cross now! he willed her desperately. The two men were making to step onto the road. They were going to help the stupid old cow, were they? He ran to the gap in the metal fence. She didn't need them.

She had left the island, and he was running to it, when he saw the car. It came rushing around the curve toward Emily, its wide nose glittering silver. "Emily, watch out!" he shouted.

She turned and stood, bewildered, in the roadway. The men had seen the car; they retreated to the pavement, gesturing at Emily. "Get back!" they shouted, overlapping, confusing.

He couldn't reach her in time. The car rushed toward her. He saw the driver in his expensive silver-painted frame: young, cocksure, aggressive, well-groomed yet coarse as a workman's hands—everything Jack hated, that threatened him. He should have known it would be such a man that would take Emily from him.

The driver saw Emily, dithering in his path. His sidewhiskered face filled with the most vicious hatred Jack had ever seen. He wrenched at the wheel. The car swooped round Emily, coiling her with a thick swelling tentacle of dust. As she stood trembling, one back wheel thudded against the curb outside the house. The car slewed across the roadway toward

a lamp-standard. Jack glimpsed the hate-filled face in the moment before it became an explosion of blood and glass.

Emily was running aimlessly, frantically, as if her ankles were cuffed together. She staggered dizzily and fell. She lay on the road, sobbing or giggling. The two men went to her, but Jack pushed them away. "We don't want your help, thank you. Nor yours either," he told the drivers emerging from their halted cars. But he accepted Dr. Tumilty's help, when the doctor hurried over from glancing at the driver, for Emily was beginning to tremble, and didn't seem to recognize the house. More drivers were gathering to stare at the crash. Soon Jack heard the approaching raucous howl of the police. The only thought he could find in his head was that they had to be deafening in order to shout everyone else's row down.

"What are you doing?"

"Just looking."

She turned from the front-room window to smile at him. Looking at what, for heaven's sake? his frown demanded. "I like watching people go by," she said.

He could see no people: only the relentless cars, dashing harsh sunlight at his house, flinging dust. Still, perhaps he should be grateful she could look. It seemed the doctor had been right: she didn't remember the accident.

That had been a week ago. Luckily the doctor had seen it happen; the police had questioned him. A policeman had interrogated Jack, but had left Emily alone, calmed by a sedative. Jack was glad she hadn't encountered the policeman, his sarcastic deference full of innuendo: "Does your wife take any drugs, sir? I suppose she doesn't drink at all? She wouldn't be under treatment?" He'd stared about the house in envious contempt, as if he had more right to be there than Jack—just as the people from the estate would, if they saw something different from their concrete council houses.

The council— They provided such people with the homes they deserved, but not Jack and Emily, oh, no. They'd offered compensation for the inconvenience of road-widening. Charity, that was all that was, and he'd told them so. A new house was what he wanted, in an area as quiet as this had used to be when he'd bought the house—and not near any estates full of rowdies, either. That, or nothing.

Emily was standing up. He started from his reverie. "Where are you going?"

"Over to the shop to buy things."

"It's all right, I'll go. What do you want?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'll see when I get there."

"No, you stay here." He was becoming desperate; he couldn't tell her why he was insisting. "Make me a list. There's no need for you to go."

"But I want to." The rims of her eyes were trembling with tears.

"All right, all right. I'll help you carry things."

She smiled brightly. "I'll get my other basket," she said, and ran upstairs a few steps before she had to slow.

He felt a terrible dry grief. This nervously vulnerable child had been the woman he'd married. "I'll look after you," he'd used to say, "I'll protect you," for he'd loved to see her turn her innocent trusting smile up to him. For a while, when they'd discovered they could have no children, she had become a woman, almost a stranger—neurotically irritable, jealous of her introversion, unpredictably morose. But when he'd retired, the child had possessed her again. He had been delighted, until her memory had begun to fail. It was almost as though his love for the child in her were wiping out the adult. His responsibility for her was heavier, more demanding now.

That was why they had gone to the seaside while the road widened: because the upheaval upset Emily, the glistening mud like ropes of dung where the pavement had been. "Our house will still be here," she'd said. "They won't have knocked that down"—not like the post office up the road. Their months by the sea had cost the last of their savings, and when they'd returned it was too late to accept the council's offer of compensation, even if he had intended to. But he mustn't blame Emily.

"Here's your basket. Won't you feel silly carrying that? Come on, then, before it gets too hot."

As they reached the gate he took her arm. Sunlight piled on them; he felt as though the clothes he wore were being ironed. Up the road, near where the post office had been, a concrete lamp-standard lay on the new roundabout, protruding rusty twisted roots. A drill yattered, a creaking mechanical shovel hefted and dumped earth. Men stood about, stripped to the waist, dark as foreigners. He pursed his lips in disapproval and ushered Emily to the subway.

The tunnel was scattered with bottles and wrappings, like leavings in a lair. The tiles of the walls were overgrown with a tangle of graffiti: short white words drooled, red words were raw wounds, ragged-edged. Another of the ceiling lights had been smashed; almost the whole of the tunnel was dim, dimmed further by the blazing daylight beyond. Something came rushing out of the dimness.

He pulled Emily back from the mouth of the tunnel. It must be a

cyclist—he'd seen them riding through, with no thought for anyone. From the estate, no doubt, where they knew no better. But nobody emerged from the dimness: nothing at all.

A wind, then, or something rolling down the steps on the far side. He hurried Emily through the chill darkness; she almost stumbled. He didn't like the subway. It felt cold as a flooded cave, and the glimmering graffiti seemed to waver like submarine plants: he mustn't over-exert himself. The sunlight leapt at him. There was nothing on the steps.

"Oh hello, Mrs. Thorpe," the shopwoman said to Emily. "Are you better?" Stupid woman. Jack chattered to her, so that she couldn't disturb his wife. "Have you got everything?" he kept asking Emily. He was anxious to get back to the house, where she would be safe.

They descended the subway steps more slowly, laden now. The passage was thickly dark against the dazzle beyond. "Let's get through quickly," he said. The darkness closed around him, snug and chill; he held Emily's arm more firmly. Cars rumbled overhead. Dark entangled colors shifted. The clatter of their hurry filled the tunnel with sharp fluttering: that must be what he heard, but it sounded like someone rushing toward them. Someone had almost reached them, brutally overbearing in the dark. For a moment, amid the writhing colors and the red filter of his panting hurry, Jack glimpsed a face. It was brief as lightning: eyes gleaming with hatred, with threat.

Jack rested in the sunlight, gripping the metal rail. No wonder he had glimpsed the face of the driver from the accident; he had almost panicked then, too. And no wonder he'd panicked just now: suppose roughs had waylaid Emily and himself down there? "I think we'll use the shops on this side in future," he said.

Back in the house he felt ill at ease, somehow threatened. People stared through the windows as if into cages. Were they what Emily liked watching? The sounds of cars seemed too close, aggressively loud.

When the evening began to settle down, Jack suggested a walk. They wouldn't use the subway, for the pavements across the road glittered with grit and glass. As he closed the gate carefully behind him a car honked a warning at Emily: impertinence. He took her arm and led her away from the road, into the suburb.

The sounds of the road fell behind. Trees stood in strips of grass laid along the pavements; still leaves floated at the tips of twigs against a calm green sky. He felt at home now. Cars sat placidly in driveways, cars were gathering outside a few of the semi-detached houses; people sat or stood talking in rooms. Did the people on the estate ever talk to each other, or just watch television all day? he wondered, strolling.

They'd strolled for several streets when he saw the boys. There were four of them, young teenagers—not that one could be sure these days, with them all trying to act older than they should be. They were dressed like pop singers: sloppily, not a suit among them. As they slouched they tugged at garden hedges, stripping leaves from privet twigs. "Do you live there?" Jack demanded. "Then just you stop that at once."

"It's not your house," said one, a boy with a burst purple lip; he twisted another twig loose.

"Go on. You just move along or you'll get something you won't forget."

"Ooh, what?" the purple-lipped boy cried, pretending effeminacy. They all began to jeer at Jack, dancing around him, dodging out of reach. Emily stood by the hedge, bewildered. Jack held himself still, waiting for one of them to come close; he could feel blood blazing in his face. "Go on, you young ruffians. If I get hold of you—"

"What'll you do? You're not our father."

"He's too old," one giggled.

Before Jack knew what was happening Emily leapt at the boy. She'd pulled a pin from her hat; if the boy hadn't flinched back the point would have entered his cheek, or his eye. "Mad old bitch," he shouted, retreating. "My father'll do you," he called as the four ran off. "We know where you live."

Jack felt stretched red, pumped full of blood. "We'd better get home now," he said harshly, not looking at her. The dull giant pins of the lamp-standards stood above the roofs, looming closer. The rough chorus of cars grew louder.

A car snarled raggedly past the gate. As Jack started and glanced back, he glimpsed movement in the subway. A pale rounded shape glimmered in the dark mouth, like the tenant of a burrow: someone peering out, framed by the muddle of graffiti. Up to no good, Jack thought distractedly. Unlocking the front door, he glanced again at the subway; a brief pale movement vanished. He turned back to the door, which had slammed open as something—a stray wind—shouldered past him.

He sat in the front room. Now, until the streetlamps glared, the drawn curtains were their own dark green. He could still feel his urgent startled heartbeats. "You shouldn't have flown at those boys," he said. "That wasn't necessary."

"I was defending you," she said plaintively.

"I had control of the situation. You shouldn't let these people make you lose your dignity."

"Well, you needn't have spoken to them like that. They were only

young, they weren't doing much harm. If you make them resentful they only get into worse trouble."

"Are you really so blind? These people don't have any love for us, you know. I wish you could see what they'll do to this house after we're gone. They'll be grown up by then, it'll be their kind who'll spoil what we've made. And they'll enjoy it, you mark my words." He was saying too much, but it was her fault, with her blind indulgence of the young—thank God, they'd never had children. "You just watch these people," he said. "You'll have them taking over the house before we're gone."

"They're only young, it's not their fault." As though this were incontestable proof, she said, "Like that poor young man who was killed."

He gazed at her speechlessly. Yes, she meant the driver in the crash. She sounded almost as if she were accusing Jack. All he could do was nod: he couldn't risk a retort when he didn't know how much she remembered.

The curtains blackened, soaked with orange light. Emily smiled at him with the generosity of triumph. She parted the curtains and sat gazing out. "I like it now it's bright," she said.

Eventually she went up to bed. He clashed the curtains together and sat pondering somberly. All this harping on youth—almost as if she wanted to remind him he had been unable to give her children. She should have married one of the men from the estate. To judge from the evidence, they spent half their time stuffing children into their wives.

No, that was unfair. She'd loved and wanted him, she still did. It was Jack she wanted to hold her in bed. He felt ashamed. He'd go to her now. He switched out the light, and the orange oozed in.

As he climbed the stairs he heard Emily moaning, in the grip of a dream. The bedroom was full of dim orange twilight, pulsing with passing lights. The bedclothes were so tangled by her writhing it was impossible to decipher her body. "Emily. Emily," he called. Her face rolled on the pillow, turning up to him. A light flashed by. The dim upturned face grinned viciously. It was a man's face.

"You, you—" He grabbed blindly for the lightswitch. Emily's face was upturned on the pillow, eyes squeezed into wrinkles against the light, lips quivering. That must be what the flash of light had shown him. "It's nothing, nothing. Go back to sleep," he said sharply. But it was a long time before he was able to join her, and sleep.

He had bought the house when he was sure they could have no children. It had cost their old home and almost the whole of their savings. It was meant to be a present for Emily, a consolation, but she hadn't been

delighted: she had thought they should leave their savings to mature with them, but property was an investment—not that he intended ever to sell the house. They had argued coldly for weeks. He couldn't bear this new, logical, disillusioned Emily: he wanted to see delight fill her eyes. At last he'd bought the house without telling her.

Unlocking the door, he had held his breath. She'd gazed about, and in her eyes there had been only a sad helpless premonition that he'd done the wrong thing. That had been worse than the day the doctor had told him he was sterile. Yet over the years she'd come to love the house, to care for it almost as if it were a child—until now. Now she did nothing but gaze from the window.

She seemed content. She seldom left the house, except for the occasional evening stroll. He shopped alone. The scribbled subway was empty of menace now. Once, returning from the shop, he saw Emily's face intent behind the shivering pane as a juggernaut thundered by. She looked almost like a prisoner.

The imitation daylight fascinated her most—the orange faces glancing at her, the orange flashes of the cars. Sometimes she fell asleep at the window. He thought she was happy, but wasn't sure; he couldn't get past the orange glint in her eyes.

She was turning her back on their home. Curls of dust gathered in corners, the top of the stove looked charred; she never drew the curtains. Her attitude depressed him. In an indefinable way, it felt as though someone were sneering at the house.

When he tried to take over the housework, he felt sneered at: a grown man on his hands and knees with a dustpan—imagine what the men from the estate would say! But he mustn't upset Emily; he didn't know how delicately her mind was balanced now. He swept the floor. His depression stood over him, sneering.

It was as if an intruder were strolling through the house, staring at the flaws, the shabbiness. The intruder stared at Emily, inert before the window; at Jack, who gazed sadly at her as he pretended to read. So much for their companionship. Didn't she enjoy Jack's company anymore? He couldn't help not being as lively as he was once. Did she wish he was as lively as the mob outside the window?

He couldn't stand this. He was simply depressing himself with these reveries. He could just make out Emily's face, a faint orange mask in the pane. "Come upstairs now," he said gently.

His words hung before him, displaying their absurdity. The sneering surrounded him as he took her arm. It was coarse, stupid, insensitive; it jeered at them for going to bed only to sleep; but he couldn't find words

to fend it off. He lay beside Emily, one arm about her frail waist; her dry slim hand rested on his. It distressed him to feel how light her hand was. The orange dimness sank over him, thick as depression, dragging him down toward a dream of sleeping miserably alone.

It was all right. She was beside him. But something dark hung over her. He squinted, trying to strain back the curdled dimness. It was a face; curly black hair framed its vicious sneer. Jack leapt at it, punching. He felt no impact, but the face burst like a balloon full of blood. The blood faded swiftly as a firework's star. He knew at once that he hadn't got rid of the face. It was still in the room.

His fist was thrust deep into the blankets. He awoke panting. He tried to slow his heart with his breathing. The orange light hammered at his eyes. He turned over, to hold Emily, to be sure he hadn't disturbed her. She was not there.

At once he knew she'd wandered out on the road. The sneering surrounded him, still and watchful. He fumbled into his dressing-gown, his feet groped for his slippers. He heard the rapid swish of cars. His head was full of the thud of a body against metal, although he had heard no such sound. He ran downstairs. He felt his mouth gaping like a letter-slot, making a harsh sound of despair.

He stumbled down into the dark. He was rushing uncontrollably; he almost fell. Parrallelograms of orange light lay stagnant inside the front door. He scrabbled at the lock and bolts, and threw the door open.

The road was bare beneath the saucers of relentless light. Only a blur of dust hung thinly above the surface. Perhaps she was in the subway. His thoughts had fallen behind his headlong search. He had slammed the gate out of his way before he realized she couldn't have bolted the door behind her.

He was awake now, in time. But he was still running, toward the snarl of a car swinging around the curve. He tottered on the edge of the pavement, then regained his balance. When he turned back to the house he saw Emily gazing between the front-room curtains. The car sped round the curve. Its light blinked in the window beside Emily: a pale bright flash, an oval glimpse of light, a face, a sneering face.

He ran into the room. "Will you get away from there and come to bed!" he shouted. His shock, his treacherous imagination, were rushing his words out of control. "Why don't you bring everyone into the garden if you want to look at them? Bring them into the house?"

She turned and stared at him. For an awful moment he was sure she'd forgotten who he was. "I'm Jack! I'm your husband!" but he couldn't bear

to say it, to know. After a while she began to walk slowly, painfully toward the stairs.

But perhaps she'd heard what he'd said. The next day several children were playing football on the pavement, using the top of their subway steps as a goal. "Don't play there," she shouted through the open window. "You'll get hurt." They came to the hedge and pointed at her, laughing, making faces. When she didn't chase them, they ventured into the garden. Before Jack could intervene she was chasing them wildly, as if she thought the pavement was as wide as it used to be.

They were returning for another chase when he strode out. "If I see you again I'll get the police to you." He glanced at Emily, and his stomach flooded with raw dismay. Perhaps he was mistaken, but he was sure that as the children had run out of the far end of the subway he'd glimpsed in her eyes a look of longing.

Chasing the children had exhausted them both. She sat at the window; he read. The day was thickly hot and stagnant, nothing moved except the cars. He felt as though he were trapped in someone's gaze.

"These children these days," she said. "It isn't their fault, it's the way they're brought up. Do you know, some parents don't want their children at all."

What was she trying to say? What was she sidling toward? He nodded, gazing at the book.

"Did you see that little girl before, that we were chasing? She had such a pretty face. It's such a pity."

Surely she wasn't heading where he suspected, surely she knew better. The heat held him limp and still.

"Don't you think it's up to people like us to help these children?" The longing was clear now in her eyes. "The unwanted ones, I mean. We could give them love. Some of them have never had any."

"Love won't feed them," he told the book.

"But we could go without. We always buy the best meat, you know. I've still a little money that I've saved from housekeeping."

He hadn't known that. Why didn't she invest it? But he felt too exhausted even to change the subject with that argument—exhausted, and depressed: she wasn't musing any longer, she was serious. "And we don't really need such a large house," she said.

Before he could recover from this betrayal she said, "Don't you think it would be nice to bring up a little girl?"

She had never mentioned adoption before. Nor had he; the idea of a strange child in his house had always seemed disturbing, threatening.

Now there was a stronger reason why they couldn't adopt a child: they were too old. "We wouldn't be able to," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because we're too old!" But when he met her bright, trusting, childlike gaze, he couldn't tell her. "Too much work. Too exhausting," he said.

"Oh, I wouldn't mind that. I could do it." Every objection he made she demolished. She had more experiences of life than most parents, she'd been brought up decently herself, she would love the child more than its own parents could, it would have a good home, they'd keep the child away from bad company. All day she persisted, through dinner, into the evening. Her eyes were moist and bright.

The orange light sank into the room, stifling. Emily's words closed him in. He was trapped, shaking his head at each point she made; he knew he looked absurd. He mustn't remind her they were old, near death. Why must she persist? Couldn't she see there was something he was trying not to say? As he stared at the book, the orange light throbbed on his eyes like blood. "We could sell the house, that would leave us some money," she said. "Wouldn't you like a little girl?"

"No," he blurted at the book. "No."

"Oh, why not?"

His answer was too quick for him. "Because the authorities wouldn't let us have one," he shouted, "you stupid old woman!"

Her face didn't change. She turned away and sat forward, toward the window. Her shoulders flinched as though a lash had cut them. "I didn't mean that. I'm sorry," he said, but she only sat closer to the pane.

He must go to her, hold her—except that when he made to stand up he felt intolerably fatuous. Every nuance of his apology echoed in his head; it sounded like a bad actor's worst line, he felt as if he were at the mercy of an audience's contempt. The sense of his own absurdity, more relentless than the heat of the orange light, pushed him back into his chair.

Emily leaned closer to the window. Suddenly he knew she was trying to see her face in the glass. She went to the hall mirror. He saw her see herself, her age, perhaps for the first time. Her face seemed to slump inward. She walked past him without a glance and sat before the window.

"Look here, I'm sorry." He was whining, each word made him feel more contemptible. Perhaps it was her contempt for him that he was feeling. It gathered darkly on him, atrociously depressing.

He couldn't comfort her while he felt like this. In fact, if it were his own depression, it might be affecting her, too. He must go upstairs,

hoping she would heal by herself. Even to stand up was a struggle. She sat still as he left the room, glancing back miserably at her.

Upstairs he felt a little better. At least he could close his eyes and clear his mind. He lay limply in the heat; orange painted the dark within his eyelids. Emily would get over it. She would have had to realize eventually. He couldn't think for her all the time, he shouted defensively. He couldn't protect her all her life. The orange glow didn't contradict him. It was soothing, empty, calm.

No, not entirely empty. Something was rushing toward him from deep in the emptiness. As it came it breathed depression at him, thick as fumes. It was rushing faster, it was on him. A face was pressed into his, bright with hatred. Before he had time to flinch back, there was nothing—but something was rushing toward him again; it thrust into his face for a moment, grinning. Again. The face. The face. The face.

He woke. His hands were clenched on the sheets. The face was gone, but for a moment, though depression muffled his thoughts, he knew why it had been there. The man had been killed without warning; he meant Jack to feel the sudden ruthless terror of death. And Jack did. He lay inert and appalled.

All of a sudden, for no reason, his depression lifted—as if someone standing over him had moved away. His mind brightened. He scoffed at his dream. What nonsense, he had killed nobody. It took him a while to wonder what Emily was doing.

He needn't run. She would only be sitting at the window. But he fought away the soothing of the orange calm and hurried to the stairs. Emily was in the hall, at the front door. Her hand was on the lock.

"Where are you going?" She glanced up at the sound of his voice. As she saw him her eyes filled with a mixture of disgust and fear. She pulled the door open; orange light spilled over her.

"Emily, wait!" She was on the path. He ran downstairs, almost falling. He was halfway down when the depression engulfed him like sluggish muddy water. At once he knew that it was surrounding Emily, blinding her to him. It had reached its intended victim.

She was running, a small helpless figure beneath the orange glare. The light spoiled her blue dress, staining it patchily black. She was moving headlong, as fast as the threat in his dream. She snatched the gate out of her way. Amid the nocturnal chorus of the city, a car was approaching.

"Stay there, Emily!" Perhaps she heard him; something made her run faster. The light throbbed, his eyes blurred. For a moment he saw something perched on her shoulder, a dark thing as big as her head,

trembling and vague as heat. When he blinked his eyes clear, it had gone, but he was sure it was still beside her. He was sure he knew its face.

She was on the roadway now, still running—not toward the far pavement, but toward the speeding car. Jack was running too, although he knew he couldn't save her. She was determined to be killed. Even if he caught her, their struggle would take them under the car.

But she mustn't die alone, with the whisper of hatred and depression at her ear. That death would be like his dream, but prolonged endlessly. She must see that he was with her. He ran; the road and the lamp-standards swayed; the orange light pounded, and his breath clawed at his lungs. He had no chance of overtaking her. She wouldn't see him.

Suddenly she slipped and fell. Jack ran faster, panting harshly; he felt the pavement change to roadway underfoot. Perhaps he could drag her out of the way—no, he could hear how fast the car was approaching. He ran to her and cradled her in his arms. She seemed stunned by the pain of her fall, but when her eyes opened he thought she saw him and smiled weakly. He managed to smile, too, although he could feel a darkness rushing toward them. Suddenly he wondered: since her tormentor had stayed here, would they be tied here, too? Was this only the beginning of their struggle?

He pressed her face into his chest to hide from her what was upon them: the car, and the grinning face inflated with blood.

Bunny Didn't Tell Us

David J. Schow

David J. Schow was born on July 13, 1955 in Marburg, West Germany—a German orphan adopted by American parents. His travels eventually led him to Los Angeles, where he now lives. An avid film fan, Schow claims to know more movie trivia than even Dennis Etchison. Schow's short fiction has appeared in Twilight Zone Magazine, Night Cry, Weird Tales, Whispers, Fantasy Tales and elsewhere. He has been a columnist for various publications and a contributing editor to film books. His eight-part series on the television show, The Outer Limits, written for Twilight Zone Magazine, formed the basis for his book, The Outer Limits Omnibus, due from Berkley Books this autumn. Schow has also written a dozen or so novelizations and series novels under at least four pseudonyms—most recently a series of four novels based on television's Miami Vice, written under the byline Stephen Grave. Tor Books has published his horror novel, The Kill Riff. Schow's two previous entries in The Year's Best Horror Stories have ranged from mordant whimsy ("One for the Horrors") to gut-wrenching horror ("Coming Soon to a Theatre Near You"). In "Bunny Didn't Tell Us" Schow treats us to a bit of graveyard humor.

THE GRAVEROBBERs worked as quickly and silently as they were able. It began to rain lightly.

The fact sounded more like the opening line to a bad grade-school joke, but the fact was that most of the embalming crew on the night shift at Forest Lawn were tae kwon do freaks. They spent as much time showing off new moves as they did tending the latest batch of customers, and were so self-involved that they represented no threat at all. Ditto the guards—they usually hated blundering about the vast cemetery in the rain. Professionalism was one thing; superstition another.

Riff favored working in the rain no matter what the scam. Water seemed to wash away both sentries and their willingness to pry, as well as providing safe background noise for nocturnal endeavors.

They were knee-deep in the hole. Riff gathered a clump of turf in one hand and squinted at it as he crumbled it apart. Rain funneled in a steady stream from the vee of his hat. "Recently tamped," was all he said, wiping his hand on his grimy topcoat. All around them the rainfall hissed into the thick, manicured landscaping.

Mechanically, Riff jabbed his folding Army spade into the dirt, stomped on the edge, and chucked the bladeful of earth over his shoulder to the right. Klondike faced him in the hole, duplicating the moves one half-beat later. Both had learned how to turn out a foxhole in Korea, and in no time they were four feet down, then five.

Klondike's spade was the first to thump against something solid and hollow. "Bingo," the larger man muttered.

Riff hesitated, then tossed back another gout of dirt anyway. Klondike smelled like a wet bearskin, and his permanent facial shadow of black beard stubble served to camouflage his face in the darkness. Riff did not necessarily enjoy working with someone as coarse as Klondike, but all his life he'd made a virtue of never questioning orders.

"Wait," he said, and the big man froze like a pointer. Riff tapped the surface beneath their feet with his spade. "Sounds funny."

They knelt and swept away clots of dirt with their gloved hands.

"Time," said Riff.

Klondike peeled back the cuff of his glove and read his luminous watch face. "0345 hours," he said. The fingertips of his gloves were stylishly sawn off, and Klondike promptly used the moment of dead time to pick his nose. "Ain't got us much time," he whispered. "Funk-hole's turning to mud."

"I know that," Riff said, hunkered down in the bottom of their excavation and resisting the urge to add "you imbecile." He plucked a surgical pen-light from a coat pocket and cupped his palm around the beam, leaning close. "Look at this."

The dime-sized dot of light revealed a silver dent—left by Riff's spade—in a smooth surface of brilliant, fire-engine red enamel. Klondike ran his fingers over it, and stared dumbly at his hand while the tiny scar in the otherwise flawless surface refilled with water.

"Bloody hell!" snapped Riff. "Bunny didn't tell us that the guy was buried in his goddamn car!"

Suddenly the drumming of rain on the exposed metal surface seemed to become incriminatingly loud.

Riff's ties to Bunny Beaudine ran back to the middle 1970s, and a half-witted punchline Bunny had fomented about finding employment for needy military vets. A decade before, Bunny had been just another

seedy Sunset Boulevard pimp, chauffeuring his anemic, scabby stable of trotters around in a creaking, third-hand Cadillac whose paint job was eighty percent primer. Then Bunny discovered cocaine, and his future turned to tinsel. Coke required bodyguards, and Bunny learned to be Bad.

Riff suspected that Bunny got a kick out of two things: Hiring white dudes to accomplish his dirty work, and vigorously dipping into his own inventory for personal gratification, both the ladies and the face Drano. His usual checklist of dumb jobs included low-power dope deliveries, playing cabbie for the girls—Bunny now captained a fleet of Mercedes from the cabin of his own Corsair limo—and the odd bit of mop-up. It was a living.

Bunny's strongarm boys packed magnums and broke bones with the frequency Riff broke wind after a plate of lasagne. Once he'd taken that first job for Bunny (a cash pass deliberately miscounted, as a test for Riff's honesty), Riff understood that there was no shaking hands, no clean leavetakings. Since he had no other prospects—1976 was a lousy job year for vets—it was just as well.

Until this current assignment came along. Riff remembered how it had gone down in Bunny's Brentwood "office."

Bunny had been laughing, flashing his ten-thousand-dollar teeth. "Poor old Desmond," he cackled. "Poor soul."

Riff had gotten a phone call and had shown up precisely on the half-hour. "What became of Desmond?" Desmond was one of Bunny's competitors. They cursed each other in private and slapped each other's shoulders, trading power handshakes, whenever anyone else was watching.

Two of Bunny's boys bellowed deep basso laughter from across the room.

"Why, poor old Desmond somehow got his ass blown off," said Bunny. "Terrible thing. You can't even live in the city anymore . . ."

The watchdogs stopped guffawing at a wave of Bunny's hand. His pinkie ring glittered and his broad-planed African face went dead serious. Riff stood, arms folded, waiting for the show to end so business could become relevant.

"What it is," Bunny said to Riff, "is this. You remember Desmond, Riff, my man?"

"I saw him a few times."

"You remember all those rings and slave bracelets and shit he used to wear all over his hands?"

"Yeah," said Riff. "Mandarin fingernails, too."

"Them's was for tooting. But you recall, right?" Bunny was nodding up and down. So far so good. "One of them rings was a cut-down from that diamond they called the Orb in the papers—stolen from that bitch in Manhattan last year."

"The one married to the toilet-paper tycoon." Riff knew the ring. It was cut down, all right, but was still of vulgar size, and worth at least a hundred grand.

"You got it. Well, here's a little piece of trivia that nobody knows. Poor old Desmond was buried wearing that ring."

Riff was already beginning to get the picture. As with all pimps up from gutter level, Desmond had insisted on burial as lavish as his lifestyle, and in a boneyard as obscene as the diamond he'd hired stolen. Riff looked back at the bodyguards. "Why didn't you just have your goons steal the ring after they blew the back of his head off?" he said, smiling.

Bunny kept his happy face on. "Why, there ain't nobody in the world would finger me; that was a accident, man," he said, his voice sing-song and full of bogus innocence. "Besides, we take the ring *then*, that means Desmond's boys be hunting it, and I don't want to end this life in the trunk of some Mexican's Chevy being drug out of the ocean by the police." He pronounced it *police*. He shrugged. "But now—now, as far as Desmond's people are concerned, that rock is a permanent resident of Forest Lawn, by the freeway. Ain't nobody gonna miss it now."

The goons chuckled on cue. Riff drew Klondike as an accomplice mostly because the hulking halfwit was the wrong color to make it in the world as a bodyguard for Bunny, but the bonus Bunny pushed in Riff's direction erased any objections. The only hitch was that no amount of cash could get Riff clear of Bunny now.

That was how Riff's adventure in the rain had begun.

"Shit!" Klondike beefed. "Asshole pimp six feet under in his muthafuggin' pimpmobile!"

"Watch your language," said Riff. "And keep your voice down!" Slick mud was beginning to join them in the hole, in force. He scooped out the bilge with his hands.

"What kinda car is it?"

Who cares, thought Riff. Dumb question; dumb goon. "Just dig, before we drown." He wanted to find out if they were near a car window they could break, to cut excavation time. They'd been putzing around on the roof for nearly half an hour. Riff realized they were on top when he found the insulated rectangle of the sunroof. The car was gigantic—maybe a

full-stretch limousine. He traced the outline of the sunroof with a finger while Klondike continued to bail sludge from an awkward squat.

"Crowbar!" Riff said over his shoulder. Soon the horizon would turn pink-gray with predawn light, and he mentally damned the end of daylight savings time again.

Klondike poked his head out of the hole, did a quick three-sixty, and returned with the crowbar. His own private mudslide was right behind him. Things were getting gooey.

"All clear topside," he said.

Not sure which side the sunroof opened from, Riff had a moment of indecision, and that was when he heard the grinding noise. It was a low whirring basso against the lighter sound of the pattering rain.

The sunroof was opening. Yellow cabin light sprayed upward from the widening hatchway.

Things happened too fast for Riff to keep track. He fell backward onto his rump in surprise, thinking, *It's one of Bunny's goddamn tricks, god-damn Bunny it's—*

It seemed a funny thing to hear a big lug like Klondike screaming. His voice spiked Riff's ears, cracking high with terror.

"Riff! It's got my leg I can't Riff *help HELP ME—!*"

And in the sickly glow of the limousine's interior lights, Riff saw what had ahold of Klondike's leg.

The suit sleeve was crushed black velvet; the cuffs, ruffled lace. The kind of overblown getup a showoff like Desmond would demand to be buried in. The ebony claw dragging Klondike backward was threaded with luminescent white mold. The brown jelly of rot glistened in the light, and the dagger fingernails that were Desmond's coke-snorting tools—now jagged and cracked—gathered, seating themselves in Klondike's left calf.

Klondike hollered.

Riff was backed into the humid mound of turned earth. He might have yelled, but his throat seemed stuffed up with grave dirt, and his tongue hugged the roof of his mouth in fear.

There was nothing for Klondike to grab as an anchor, and the relentless tow of the slime-clotted hand pulled him, wriggling, to block the light from within the buried car. Another arm slid through the crack of space and snaked around Klondike's waist in a hideous bear-hug, from below. Dense black mud was dripping down into the car as Klondike thrashed to no gain against the dead, locked embrace.

Riff could still see, too well.

The pressure increased. Gray knuckle bones popped through wet splits in the decayed meat, and Klondike screamed one last time.

The sound of his back breaking apart was the splintering of dry bamboo, the crunching of ice between the teeth. It cut off the screaming. Then Klondike, all of him, began to fold into the hole in a way Riff had never seen a human body bend before.

Riff's own body thawed enough to move, and one hand grasped the spade. He took a single step closer.

Klondike's body hung upward in a ludicrous bow-shape, feet and arms in the night air. Something else in his body suddenly gave way with a sharp, breaking-carrot noise, and he sagged a few inches farther down into the sunroof.

Riff, trembling, raised the spade, blade down. Klondike was as dead as a side of beef. Riff was not watching him so much as the moldering hands that pulled him down. There, on the middle finger of one, was the diamond.

When he lifted the spade to strike, the dark, oily mud greasing the roof of the car skimmed his feet from beneath him, and he sprawled headlong on top of what was left of Klondike.

Now Riff screamed, because the groping claw had locked around the lapel of his topcoat three inches from his nose, pulling him inexorably downward along with his inert partner. Klondike's stale animal odor stung Riff's nostrils for a fast instant before being washed away by the eye-steaming stench of putrefaction. Riff's guts boiled and heaved. He was sinking into the impossibly small sunroof.

He flailed; got his heel against the lip of the hole. Like a hungry spider, the graveyard hand was making for his Adam's apple, and he fought to slow it down. When his fingers sank into the oleaginous dead flesh, he killed the onrushing spasm of revulsion by jerking backward hard enough to dislocate his shoulder.

He had a grip on the ring when he did it.

The thick, drenched tweed of the coat separated with a heavy purr drowned out by the rain. Riff plunged backward and wedged into the rapidly dissolving dirt mound, shuddering uncontrollably, teeth clacking, completely apeshit with panic.

In the sickly yellow glow, he saw that the maggotty flesh of the ring finger had stripped away like a rotten banana peel, exposing a still-clutching skeleton finger. The sound it made against the red enamel was like a fork tine raked against a porcelain sink.

Brown gunk was leaking from between his own fingers, and he opened his fist to reveal a diamond almost as big as a golf ball, nestled in clumps

of buttery skin that was warm only because it had been inside Riff's closed hand.

Riff's body would not move; he was frozen from the bowels down, his back married to the pit wall. If he looked away, all he would see were dancing, round-edged rectangles of yellow light.

Klondike's chin was still perched on the edge of the sunroof. The now-ringless hand in lace and black velvet circled his body and tugged. Klondike's upper row of teeth caught on the rubber insulation strip. Another tug, and his forehead bonked against the hatch. Then the rest of him slid into the hole all at once and was gone.

Riff was whimpering now, still cemented to the spot, transfixed by the waiting yellow hole. He could just see the upper curve of one of the phony electric braziers on either end of the front windows. Yellow squares overlapped in his pupils; in his mind he saw a million times over the rotting hand emerging again, grasping, pulling up a shoulder, revealing a head and torso . . .

"Here!" he yelled, his bones finally grinding into motion. "Here, God damn it! Keep it! Bunny wanted it, not me! *Take it back—!*" He flung the diamond without aiming. It bounced on the roof with a thunk, and wandered toward the sunroof like a crystal BB in a Brobdinagian puzzle maze.

It decided at last to drop in, and vanished, noiselessly.

Riff's treacherous body now insisted that he run, that he set an Olympic record for running in the rain.

The sunroof began to whirr slowly shut, paring away the light. Riff's heartbeat punched away at his throat. The last of the ooze in his hand was rinsed away.

Then he piled out of the hole and hauled his poor white ass toward the freeway at maximum speed. In forty-five minutes the rain changed to a five-alarm downpour, and Riff stood in his own private puddle, facing the singularly unamused gaze of Bunny.

"Turn him out," said Bunny, flatly, and two of his boys winnowed down to his waterlogged skivvies.

"I told you I don't have the ring," said Riff, still shivering. "But you're not going to believe that any more than you'll believe that Klondike—"

"Pulled a doublecross, bashed you with a shovel, tied you up with your own coat and took the diamond?" finished Bunny. His eyes bugged, watery and yellow with sickle-cell. "Shit. Any one o' them things, maybe—but Klondike didn't have enough battery power to invent all

four. You're jerking me around, Riff my friend. Maybe you didn't even make it out to the grave, huh?"

Riff swallowed. Bunny was getting ready to do something nasty.

"I'm not lying," he said carefully. "Klondike is still at the gravesite."

Anticipating Bunny's next accusation, one of the hulks flanking the doorway to the office stepped forward. "I know what you're thinking, boss," he said in a voice as deep and growly as a diesel truck engine. "That boy Desmond is as dead as one of them barbecued chickens in the market. Me and Tango was a hundred percent sure." He back-stepped to his place at the door, and Riff thought of a cuckoo clock.

"You took a hundred percent of my green," said Bunny. "You *better* be goddamn sure." He said gah-dam.

"Can I have my pants back?" said Riff. Regrettably, it drew Bunny's pique away from his bulldogs and refocused it on himself.

"Give him his duds," said Bunny. "He's going out there with us." He rose to his buggywhip-skinny six-two and wired an expensive pair of rose-tinted shades around his face. "And if you're snowjobbin' me, boy—"

"I know," Riff nodded as he fought his way back into his sodden clothing. "I'll have a hard time peddling Veteran's Day poppies wearing a cast up to my eyebrows."

"You got it."

They made the drive in funereal silence, and nobody cared about the dawn and the dirty floormop hue it turned the horizon. LA's surface streets were flooding by now, and the homeowners in the Hollywood Hills would be cursing the mudslides, and it was obvious that visitor business at Forest Lawn would be just . . . Well, thought Riff—they were assured of no disturbances, anyway.

The gorilla named Tango broke out three umbrellas in basic black, and nobody moved to share one with Riff, who led them down to Plot #60 from an access road charmingly called Magnolia View Terrace. It proved a lot easier than sneaking up from the freeway. The heavily saturated turf around Desmond's final resting place made their shoes squish. Bunny's Gucci loafers were goners, Riff thought with not a little satisfaction.

Forest Lawn was discreet concerning such peccadilloes as vandalism. No matter what happened to Desmond's grave, the news would never make the *Times*, and the wad of bills Tango had slapped into the gatekeeper's palm guaranteed privacy for proper mourning.

One of those characteristic Astroturf tarps had been pegged over the hole. Desmond's garish monument stone spired toward outer space like a granite ICBM.

"So what?" Bunny said loudly as a jolt of thunder shook the ground. "They covered it up!" said Riff.

All three men turned to look at him. "I can see that, null and void," Bunny snapped. "Get on with it!" The pimp stood with his hands deep in the pockets of his black overcoat, Tango's buddy holding an umbrella over him like a dutiful Egyptian slave. Riff never could dredge up the guy's name—the two were as interchangeable as knife maniac movies—so he pointed at Tango. "Help him," Bunny said, and Tango eyed the tarp doubtfully before stepping sidewise down into the pit. Bunny thought he could hear a noise through the downpour, a kind of electric fly-buzzing. Maybe construction equipment was working somewhere nearby.

Riff held up the corner of the tarp for Tango. There was a very dim yellow glow emanating from beneath it, and water had pooled in its middle, causing it to sag.

As Tango ducked under the tarp, Riff planted his foot dead bang into the bigger man's ass, driving him inside. The tarp flopped wetly back into place. Tango's partner saw it happen, and automatically broke his revolver from its armpit holster, bringing it to bear on the bridge of Riff's nose.

But by then, Tango had started screaming.

He shot up against the tarp from beneath, hurling water all over the trio just as Bunny pointed to Riff and shouted, "Blow him away!" Then he took a miscalculated step that dumped him onto his butt in the mud.

Riff grabbed the big magnum barrel just as it went off in his face. There was a backward tug as the slug whizzed cleanly through the sleeve of his overcoat. The pistolero's second shot headed off into the stratosphere as the slimed incline of the pit came apart like warm gelatin under his heels. He slid indecorously down into Riff's embrace. As he flailed for balance, Riff wrested the gun away and gave him a no-nonsense bash in the face with it that flattened his nose to cartilaginous pulp and rolled his eyeballs up into dreamtown.

It had taken maybe two seconds, total. Riff quickly climbed to the rim of the grave. He knew how, by now. The gunman's semiconscious body oozed slowly downward until his legs were beneath the tarp edge. Then he was pulled the rest of the way inside.

Topside, Bunny was still on his back, trying to scramble his own petite shooting iron past the silver buttons on his double-breasted overcoat. He looked up, glaring hotly, and saw a dripping, mud-caked bog monster pointing an equally mud-caked revolver in his direction. His hands stopped moving and his eyes became very white.

From behind Riff, there came a sound like a green tree branch being

twisted in half, followed by nothing except the patter of the new rain. One of the tent pegs popped loose and the tarp sagged into the hole.

Bunny's face was a livid crimson-black with rage. The knowledge that he had been outdrawn, however, did not stop him from trying to preserve his image by saying, "I'll kill your ass for this, you know," in his quiet, bad-pimp's hiss.

"What it is, Bunny," said Riff, gesturing with the gun, "is you need to climb down into this hole."

"*Tango—!*" Bunny screeched, trying to crawl backward.

Riff frowned and shot Bunny once, in the left leg just below the kneecap. Blood mingled with the mud and gore spoiling his seven-hundred-dollar suit. "This isn't a *movie*, Bunny; just get in the hole."

Hiding his pain behind clenched teeth, Bunny began to drag himself toward the pit. When he backed down into it, on top of the tarp, his hands going wrist-deep in the muck, he looked up at Riff and in his best snake-charming voice said, "Why?" mostly to buy a couple of seconds more. It was extra seconds that always counted in rescue time.

"Because I gotta change my life, Bunny," he said, looming over him with the gun.

Buy more seconds. "I'll let you," said Bunny, gasping now. "Anything you want, man. Partners. We'll—"

Riff was about to tell Bunny not to bullshit a bullshitter when the ruglike tarp heaved mightily up, splitting in the middle. The first thing that came out was yellow light. The second thing that came out was a black velvet-clad arm that captured Bunny's wounded leg in its trash compactor grip very nicely. Bunny slid three more feet with a loud cry of pain.

One thing about those limos, Riff thought as he turned away and walked back up the slope. He'd noticed it during the ride out in Bunny's own chariot. They sure had a lot of room inside.

Bunny's pocket pistol fired four, five times behind him and then stopped.

Riff pawed around under the limousine's bumper for the magnetic case containing the spare keys, and when he got behind the wheel he involuntarily glanced at the car's sunroof. The two cars were probably a lot alike.

He did not stick around to hear the tiny whirring noise coming from Plot #60. Nor did he ever see the ridiculously fat diamond left at the edge of the grave, as payment. A Forest Lawn worker, finding it later in the day and assuming it to be a cheap crystal because of its large size, took it to his Pasadena apartment and hung it in the kitchen window,

Pinewood

Tanith Lee

Born in north London in September, 1947, Tanith Lee had her first book, The Dragon Hoard, published fifteen years ago. Since that time she has become one of the field's most popular authors, with some thirty books of fantasy and science fiction for adults and another ten or so for young readers—this in addition to short stories, radio plays, and two scripts for Blake's Seven. Lee's most recent books include a science fiction novel, Days of Grass; a DAW Books reissue of two of her MacMillan novels, Dark Castle, White Horse; a fourth novel in her Flat Earth series, Delirium's Mistress; and a collection of stories, Night's Daughter. Just finished, a major historical novel set during the French Revolution.

CLEAR MORNING LIGHT slanted across her face and woke her. She turned on her side and murmured:

"David. David, darling, I think it must be awfully late—"

Receiving no answer, she opened her eyes. The other side of the bed was empty, and the little clock on his side table showed half past ten. Of course, he had woken when the alarm went off, as she never did, and left her to sleep. The clock's little round face, like cracked eggshell, ticked with a menacing reproach. She had always been certain it disliked her, in a humorous rather than a sinister manner, because she never responded to its insistent morning screams, and when David was away on business, forgot to wind it up.

Beyond the bright window the pines rubbed their black needles against the autumn wind. She shivered as she sat up in the bed. The gothic trees disturbed her, a stupid notion for a woman of thirty-seven, she told herself.

Dear David. She brushed her teeth with swift meticulous strokes. He alone had never minded about her sluggish waking.

She examined her eyes and her throat in the harsh light, bravely. Not so bad. Not so bad, Pamela, for the elderly lady you are. She smiled as she ran the bath, thinking of her anxious questionings, her painful jokes:

"I'm not too old for you, darling, really. People will ask you at parties why you brought your mother—" in reality she was three years David's senior—and the batch of youthful snaps: "Oh, but I look so young in these—" He was good to her, sensing the nervous, helpless steps she took toward that essentially, prematurely female precipice of age—the little line, the gray hair. He told her all the things she wanted to hear from him, all the good things, and never seemed to find her tiresome. He had always had a perfect patience and kindness toward her. And she had always known that she had been unusually lucky with this man. She might so easily have loved a fool or a boor and found out too late, as had Jane, or her sister Angela, a man with no ability to imagine how things might be for the female principal in his life—a lack of comprehension amounting to xenophobia.

Sitting in the bath she had a sudden horror that this was the day for Mrs. Meadowes, the cleaning lady. A twice-weekly visitation of utter cleanliness and vigor, she nevertheless doted on David, and, naturally, bullied Pamela. Frantically Pamela towed and scattered talc. She never seemed to know where she was with Mrs. Meadowes. Her days and times of arrival seemed to be in constant flux. And now, come to think of it, Pamela remembered she was to meet David for lunch.

She grasped the phone and dialed the Meadowes' number. An incoherent child answered, presently to be replaced by a recognized contralto.

"Oh—Mrs. Meadowes, Pamela Taylor here—I'm dreadfully sorry, but I simply couldn't remember—is it today you're coming? Or is it tomorrow or something?"

There was a pause, then the contralto said carefully:

"Well, dear, I can fit you in tomorrow. If you like."

"Oh, good, then it wasn't today. Thank you so much. Sorry to have bothered you. Goodbye."

There had been something distinctly strange about the Meadowes phone call, she thought as she ate her grapefruit. Probably something to do with that appalling child. She switched on the radio. She caught a news bulletin, as she always seemed to do. Somewhere a plane had crashed, somewhere else an earthquake—she switched off. Angela had frequently told her that she should keep herself abreast of the news, not bury her head in the sand. But she simply could not stand it. Papers depressed her. They came for David, and when he forgot to take them with him to the office as he always seemed to nowadays, she would push them out of sight, bury them behind cushions and under piles of

magazines, afraid to glimpse some horror before she could avert her eyes. David teased her a little. "Where's the ostrich hidden my paper today?"

As she constructed her peach-bloom cosmetic face before the mirror she thought of Angela, vigorously devouring black gospels of famine, war, and pestilence with her morning coffee. James liked her to know what she was talking about at their dinner parties. He rated a woman's intelligence by her grasp of foreign correspondents and yesterday in parliament. It was in a way rather curious. Angela had met James in the same month Pamela had met David.

She took the car with her into town, a feat she performed with some dread. David was a superb and relaxed driver, she by contrast, sat in rigid anxiety at the wheel. Her fears seemed to attract near disasters. Dogs, children, and India rubber balls flew in front of her wheels as if magnetized, men in Citroens honked and swore, and juggernauts herded her off the road. Normally she would take the bus, for David often used the car, but today it lurked in the garage, taunting her, and besides she was pushed for time. She reached the restaurant ten minutes late, and went to meet him in the bar, but he had not yet arrived. Bars were unfortunate for her, and alone she shunned them. David said she had a flair for being picked up; men who looked mafioso would offer her martinis, and all she seemed able to do in her paralyzed fright was apologize to them. She left the bar and went into the restaurant and ordered a sherry at her table.

The room felt rather hot and oppressive, and all the other tables were filling up, except her own. She drank her sherry down in wild gulps and the waiter leaned over her:

"Would madam care to order now?"

"Oh—no thank you. I'm sorry, you see, I'm waiting for my husband—"

She trailed off. A knowing and somber look had come over the man's face. "Oh, God, I suppose he thinks I'm a whore, too." She took out a cigarette and smoked it in nervous bursts. She could see another waiter watching her from his post beside a pillar. "I shall wait another ten minutes and then I shall go."

It was fifteen minutes past two when she suddenly remembered. It came over her like a lightning flash, bringing a wave of embarrassment and relief in its wake. Of course, David had told her very last thing last night that the lunch would have to be canceled. A man was coming from Kelly's—or Ryson's—and he would have to take him for a working snack at the pub. She felt an utter fool. Good heavens, was her memory going this early? She almost giggled as she threaded between the tables.

She shopped in the afternoon, and ate a cream cake with her coffee

in a small teashop full of old ladies. She had bought David a novel, one of the few Graham Greene's he hadn't collected over the years. She had seen for some time that he was having trouble with his present reading—the same volume had lain beside the round-faced clock for over a month.

The journey home was relatively uneventful. At the traffic lights a boy with a rucksack leaned to her window. She thought in alarm that he was going to demand a lift, or else tell her in an American voice of how he had found Jesus in San Francisco, but, in fact, he only wanted directions to Brown's the chemists. It seemed such a harmless request it filled her with incongruous delight. Purple and ocher cloud drift was bringing on the early dusk in spasms of rain. With a surge of immeasurable compassion she offered him, after all, the lift she had been terrified of giving. David would be furious with her, she knew. It was a stupid thing to do, yet the boy looked so vulnerable in the rain, his long dark hair plastered to his skull. He was an ugly, shy, rather charming student, and she left him at the chemists after a ten-minute ride during which he thanked her seven times. It turned out his mother was Mrs. Brown, and he had hitched all the way from Bristol.

After he had gone, she parked the car, and went to buy fresh cigarettes. Coming from the tobacconists, she saw the cemetery.

She had forgotten she would see the cemetery on her errand of mercy. It was foolish, she knew, to experience this "morbid dread," as Angela would no doubt put it. It was, nevertheless, a perfect picture of horror for her—the ranks of marble markers under the orange monochrome sky with rain falling on their plots and withered wreaths, and down through the newly-turned soil to reach the wooden caskets underneath. . . . She experienced a sudden swirling sickness, and ran through it to the car. Inside, the icy rain shut out, she found that she had absurdly begun to cry.

"Oh, don't be such an idiot," she said aloud.

She turned on the car's heater, and started vigorously for home, nearly stalling. She was much later than she had meant to be.

There were no lights burning in the house, and she realized with regret that he would be late again. She coerced the unwilling car into the garage, and ran between the rustling pines. She clicked a switch in every room and resuscitated the television to reveal three children up to their eyes in some form of super sweet. Their strawberry-and-cream bedecked faces filled her with disgust. She had never liked children, and never wanted them. She paused, her hand on the door, a moment's abstracted thought catching at her mind—had she failed David in this? She could remember him saying to her as she sobbed against him:

"I only want you, you know that, and nothing else matters."

That had been after the results of the tests. In a way she felt she had wished herself into barrenness. She thought of Angela's two sons, strapping boisterous boys, who went canoeing with their father, and brought home baskets of mangled catch from a day's fishing, and spotted trains, and bolted their food to get back to incongruous and noisy activities in their bedroom.

"A man needs sons," Angela had once said. "It's a sort of proof, Pamela. Why don't you see a specialist? I can give you the address."

But then Angela and James had not slept together in any sense for ten years, Pamela thought with sudden, spiteful triumph, and it had always been a doubtful joy to them. She remembered David's arms about her and that earthy magic they made between them, an attraction that had increased rather than diminished.

The phone rang.

It made her jump.

"Oh, damn."

She picked it up, and heard, with the relevance of a conjuration, her sister's cool, well-managed tones.

"Oh, hullo, Angela. I don't want to be a cow, but this really is rather a bad time—I was just about to start dinner—"

"Pamela, my dear," Angela said, her voice peculiarly solemn, "are you all right?"

"All right? Of course I am. What on earth—"

"Pamela, I want you to listen to me. Please, my dear. I wouldn't have rung, but Jane Thomson says she saw you in Cordells at lunch time. She says, oh, my dear, she says she saw you waiting for someone." Angela sounded unspeakably distressed. "Pamela, who were you waiting for?"

Pamela felt a surge of panic wash over her.

"I—oh, no one. Does it matter?"

"Darling, of course it does. Was it David you were waiting for, like the last time?"

Pamela held the phone away from her ear and looked at it. There was a bee trapped in the phone, buzzing away at her. She had always been terribly afraid of bees.

"I really have to go, Angela," she shouted at the mouthpiece.

"Oh, Pamela, Pamela," Angela said. She seemed to be crying. "Darling, David can't come back to you. Now now."

"Be quiet," Pamela said.

The bee went on buzzing.

"Pamela, listen to me. David is dead. Dead, do you hear me? He died of peritonitis last July. For God's sake, Pamela—"

Pamela dropped the phone into its receiver and the buzzing stopped.

The dinner was spoiled before she realized how late he was going to be after all. He had told her the conference might run on, and not to wait up for him. She waited, however, until midnight. Upstairs, she took the book from the bedside table and replaced it with the Graham Greene—it would surprise him when he found it.

She hated to sleep without him, but she was very tired. And she would see him in the morning.

Outside, the pines clicked and whispered, but she did not listen.

The Night People

Michael Reaves

Born in 1950 in San Bernardino, California, Michael Reaves currently resides in Woodland Hills (close enough to Los Angeles to commute and far enough to avoid the smog). He attended Clarion in 1972 and made his first sale to Clarion III. Since then Reaves has sold a dozen or so short stories to places like Twilight Zone Magazine and Fantasy & Science Fiction—as well as ten novels, including Darkworld Detective, The Shattered World, and Hellstar (the last with Steve Perry). This is in addition to well over a hundred teleplays—mostly Saturday morning animations—but including scripts for such shows as The Twilight Zone. His latest books are “a fantasy noir called Street Magic” from Tor and a sequel to The Shattered World. Reaves and rising fantasy star Steve Perry are also working on a film for Catalina Productions called The Omega Cage, based on their forthcoming novel.

THINGS HAD NOT changed that much. I found a basement single in one of those old brick-and-black-iron buildings downtown, just off Evangeline, near the Underground City. It was \$275 a month for two rooms, a Murphy bed, and a refrigerator that rattled like a snake. There were only three wall outlets and most of the windows were painted shut, but it also had a tiny fold-down desk, a built-in bookshelf, and space for an easel. The whole place was very small, but that did not matter.

It was not a quiet building; there were children, and the landlady in the apartment upstairs communed with God regularly and enthusiastically. That didn't matter either. I bought a stereo cassette player with headphones and wore soft-wax earplugs when I slept, which was often past noon. I had realized at least one lifelong, though minor, desire: after years of rising at dawn, I was now staying up as late as three or four A.M. I had become a night person.

I adjusted to it surprisingly easily. When I awoke, I would exercise; a garage sale had provided me with a bench and some weights. I found an old mailbag in a trash bin behind the post office, filled it with rags and

beans and rice, and hung it from one of the many water pipes that crisscrossed the ceiling. I would beat on it regularly; I had no particular skill, but it helped, along with pushing weights, to discharge some of the tension that had built up during the past few months. The pipes were also very useful for chin-ups and vertical sit-ups. After an hour or so of that, I would paint—as much as ten hours straight sometimes except for meals. To save money I made an easel and mixed my own pigments in the sunlit alley behind the building.

Despite extensive use of drop clothes, flecks of paint stippled the walls and the old hardwood floors, and the kitchen sink was soon stained with a dark rainbow. I opened what windows I could and bought an ancient, clattering fan, but the pungent smells of paint, thinner, and linseed oil were still almost overpowering. I lived in dread of a surprise visit from the landlady, who already viewed me with suspicion due to the Justin Courtenay prints I had hung on one wall. There were two of them: *The Night People* and *Eros Exotica*, his most famous works. The former's street scene alone, with its Bosch-like decadence and surreal evil, must have immediately labeled me in her mind as a devil worshipper, and as for the latter—I'm surprised she did not attempt to have me evicted.

When my vision would blur from eyestrain and fumes, I would go out. Sometimes I would sit at a tiny wrought-iron table in one of the jazz clubs on King Snake Road, nursing a drink and listening to horns scorching the blue air; mostly I would just wander the streets and watch the colorful pirate parade of night life. Like a vampire, I now seemed to feel fully alive only after dark. I visited my old neighborhoods and haunted, reliving scenes from my childhood that had faded to sere daguerreotypes from memory. I tried to feel something, anything, and couldn't.

I was back in New Delphi, the city where I'd been born. But I wasn't home.

It had been ten years, not counting two visits to my parents after they had moved to Blessed Shoals. I had long since lost touch with those few friends I had made in high school and four years of art school. Perhaps, I told myself, I would look them up. There was no hurry—we tend to think of people left behind as being frozen in time's ice, waiting patient and unchanged. Perhaps I would see them eventually. But for now there was to be nothing but work.

Samantha had been a night person; the times we retired together in Los Angeles had been rare. I was always asleep by twelve at the latest, while she rarely closed her eyes before four A.M. A few times we would

pass each other in that gray, still time just before dawn—she on her way to bed, I to put in a few hours at the light board before hitting the gym.

Maybe the difference in our circadian rhythms was a sign of basic incompatibility. I should have heeded from the beginning, but initially, in fact, I found it charming. I envied Samantha; I had always longed to be a night person, had always thought it a badge of creativity. Many of our friends were writers, artists, or musicians, and did most of their work in those quiet, neon-lit hours.

But to me the land that lay beyond midnight was an immense *terra incognita*. I had forced myself to stay awake all night a number of times, and each had left me feeling like the walking dead for days afterward. At last I had accepted my diurnal nature; regretfully, for I viewed the night as a separate, magical world, and longed to be part of it. I never felt quite right about working to the prosaic sounds of car engines warming and garbage cans rattling, rather than to a mysterious romantic silence broken only by an occasional siren or police helicopter.

In one respect, the split shift that Samantha and I lived was advantageous; we could only afford a two bedroom apartment, which meant that one room had to serve as both her office and my studio. I think that, had we labored in that small area at the same time, what happened between us would have happened much sooner. We were both at the same stage in our careers; I had sold several paintings and lithographs and been shown in some of the trendier galleries along Melrose Avenue, while she had placed a dozen short stories in small-press magazines and anthologies and was working on a novel. We supported ourselves by freelancing for animation studios which produced children's cartoons for Saturday morning television. She wrote the scripts and I drew the storyboards. It paid very well; three months' work let us spend the rest of the year on our own labors of love.

I met Samantha by calling to compliment her on a script she had written, one which I was boarding. Six months later we were living together; exactly one year after that, to the day, I left Los Angeles.

Samantha and I had become lovers before we had become friends, and only later discovered that, despite appearances, we had nothing in common. There was a gulf between us that was far wider, far deeper, than the difference between day and night. Looking too long and too deeply into that gulf—that, and not the petty bourgeois bickering we had constantly engaged in, had been our mistake. It had driven me away from Los Angeles, which, despite its night life, is a city of harsh brightness, a land where people drive miles beneath a desert sun to visit tanning

parlors. It had brought me back to New Delphi, the epitome of the Deep South, a true city of night, surrounded by pre-Cambrian bayous. Magic still lived here, and here I could, I hoped, put down on canvas what I had left behind, before it was too late.

I had been there nearly a month when I turned thirty. No doubt in reaction, I rose early and worked out long and hard that day, beating the bag, jumping rope and lifting weights until every joint and muscle ached and the windows were fogged. My usual schedule was to follow this with a blenderful of fruit, brewer's yeast, protein powder, and bran, and then to start mixing colors. Instead, I took a walk.

It was a bright spring day, the air already hinting at the approaching summer warmth and humidity. I thought briefly about how intolerable my rabbit-hole would be and how it would affect the painting if I did not somehow find the money for an air conditioner. I think it was the first time I had let my thoughts venture more than a week into the future since I had moved.

The crowds seemed larger and slower-moving. Though full of variety, they were drab compared to the perennial Mardi Gras ensemble that filled the streets after dark. There were more cars with out-of-state plates; tourist season was beginning.

I had not been outside before dusk in nearly two weeks. The afternoon sun was giving me a headache, despite the mirrored sunglasses I wore. I decided suddenly to take the Underground City tour. It had been nearly fifteen years since I had last seen it, but I remembered it very well. The thought of the cool, damp brick streets, the deserted storefronts and houses spotlighted by lightbulbs, and most of all the quiet, was very appealing. I bought a ticket and joined the tour group that was already descending the concrete steps.

The tour was composed mostly of fat men in loud shirts and hats advertising beer brands or truck companies, and women whose purpose in life was to bat futilely at crying children. I walked slowly, dropping behind them all, paying no attention to the tour guide's cheery speech about the Thanksgiving Day Battle of 1864 in which Union soldiers had put the entire downtown area to the torch. New buildings had eventually been built on top of the old, leaving the fire-gutted ruins to molder in darkness until the city fathers had decided in 1957 to restore them as a tourist attraction.

I was surprised at how accurately I remembered it; particularly Alastair Street, the infamous artists' colony. Even as a child I had been fascinated with its history. Here such authors as Bierce, Brochensen,

Dedric, and even Poe had lived or visited in antebellum times. In 1849, while living in a small garret overlooking the square, Marnauk had composed *The Executioner's Daughter*, an opera considered at the time so savagely perverse that there had been talk of deporting him. It was in his Alastair Studio that Courtenay had painted his two most controversial works, and also such masterpieces as *Images in Stone and Flame*. Every other doorway along the narrow, twisting length had been rumored to hide an opium den or a Satanic church. The colony had lived on in various imaginations after the fire: in the 1930s *Weird Tales* had published the lurid "Alastor Street" stories of Westin James, a pulp writer of the Lovecraft coterie. There had been a Roger Corman movie and even a rock album during the Sixties, all inspired by the legends of Alastair Street.

I walked along the rebuilt wooden sidewalks, looking into houses and stores. Some interiors had been outfitted with displays in an attempt to recapture the stilted past. I leaned against the four-paned window of Courtenay's studio and looked at the mannequin within, stiffly posed in oil-daubed smock, palette in one hand and brush in the other. A statue of a young female model, discreetly draped in a robe, reclined on a nearby hassock. The exhibit was staged so that one could not glimpse the painting on Courtenay's easel, but the pose of the model—if not the bland features—suggested *Eros Exotica*. The scene was the beginning of his work on it, of course; good taste would have prevented the designers of the tour from even hinting at the final stages. The choice of paintings was appropriate. *Eros Exotica* had been Courtenay's last work, finished only a day before the Union Army had attacked. The artist had died in the fire, and yet he was here, frozen in time by the strength of his art and the memory of others. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath of stale air, and thought about the black waters of Devil's Bay, only a few miles away.

When I opened my eyes again, the model had moved.

I stared in surprise. The hassock was near the fireplace, where the red light reflecting off crumpled foil looked vaguely like logs ablaze. The model leaned forward and stretched, then looked toward the window. I saw her face quite clearly, white as fresh-cut pine, with delicate bones. Her eyes were violet. They went wide with surprise—and fear—when she saw me. Then she stood, wrapping the robe about her, and was quickly gone into the darkness of another room.

I heard footsteps behind me.

"Will you please keep up with the group, sir?"

The tour guide was about ten years younger than I and politely stern, like an airline stewardess trying to convince someone to fasten a seat belt. The group waited several pools of light down the street. I felt oddly

contrite. The astonishing scene I had just witnessed, and the calm unreality of the city itself, made my transgression seem somehow more serious than it was.

"I'm sorry." I made a vague gesture toward the window. "There's someone in there."

"Quite possibly, sir. We have people working on these exhibits all the time."

"No, I mean the model in the exhibit—" I turned back toward the window, gesturing, and stopped, speechless. The model was still there, exactly as she had been posed before, unmistakably a construct of paint and plaster.

The guide turned and started back toward the rest of the group. I hesitated, then hurried forward and caught up with her. "I'm sorry—I'm not feeling too well . . ."

Her expression changed immediately to one of professional concern. This was a situation she knew how to deal with. "Of course, sir. This way." She took me back to the exit stairs, keeping up a solicitous monologue. I hardly heard a word of it. The face of the model stayed before me in the darkness of the Underground City. I knew I had seen her before.

Darkness had fallen; the Night People, as I thought of them, were out in force. I walked home quickly through the crowds, past street dancers and musicians, solicitors of both sexes, and others, paying little attention to the impromptu street parties and cheer that always filled the bright streets after sundown. My mood was difficult to describe; I was not so much concerned for my state of mind as I was preoccupied by the strength of the vision I had seen. It is, I understand, common among artists, whatever their fields, to place any shock or traumatic event safely within the boundaries of their work. Samantha had told me once that her first reaction, upon hearing of her husband's death, was to think of it as a dramatic scene in a novel or story. Actors and musicians I have known have confessed similar urges to sublimate terrible or frightening events in the contexts of their artistry. So it was now with me; I avoided thinking of what had just happened in terms of losing control, and concentrated instead upon the happening itself.

When I see something in a vivid moment of imagination—as I had thought I had seen the woman's face turning toward me in the studio—then it stays with me, and I tend to see it almost everywhere I look. Women whom I passed on my way back to my apartment, and female faces on billboard advertisements, all seemed to take on that same pale,

shocked look, that intense violet gaze. I studied the vision as I saw it in these many manifestations, and the more I saw it, the more I was convinced that I had seen the face before.

When I reached my room I opened *Images of Madness*, a large reference book on the works of Albright, Bosch, Munch, and others, including Courtenay. I found the detail from *Eros Exotica* and stared at it for quite some time. It was the same. The mannequin had been merely a department store sculpture, without even a superficial similarity to the painting; but the image before me now was that of the woman who had looked at me and fled the room. I had seen the luckless, nameless model Courtenay had used over a hundred years before in his most depraved—and most brilliant—creation.

As a child in New Delphi, I had entertained for many years the notion that night was a magic, timeless environment, in which past, present, and future were one and the same. Looking out from my window at the dark street, it was easy to imagine that pirates still docked in Devil's Bay, or that the shouts and cries I could occasionally faintly hear were the sounds of Union and Confederate soldiers fighting. The rising sun thawed time again, set it flowing once more, and restored order to the world. But at night, all times were one.

I had told Samantha once about this, hoping she would find the childish notion as charming as I did in memory. Instead, she had asked me how I explained the many evidences of the continued functioning of time after sundown, such as clocks ticking off the minutes until dawn. I had countered by asking how someone who wrote childrens' fantasies could be so literal-minded, and it had built from there into yet another fight.

And yet I was right, in an ironic sense. For I left her at night, at that time when she was most alive, and now she is suspended, frozen, no less than my childhood friends or Justin Courtenay himself.

I had chosen oil as my medium. Acrylic and watercolor dry too fast, and none of the other methods I had used in the past—etching, lithography, charcoal—seemed appropriate. I had started with the most somber shades and built up from them, trying to evoke the image from the darkness.

It had been hard, at first, keeping the room properly lit. As the sun moved across the sky, it was necessary to change the easel's position accordingly. The best time, I found, was twilight; in that brief stillness after sunset and before darkness, subtle shadings and interplays were

most visible to me. On occasion I would have to alter what I had done earlier. It was frustrating.

My hand would cramp from holding the palette, and the old coveralls I had bought at the Salvation Army crackled with dried paint. I wished I could continue working after dark, but the harsh artificial light destroyed all subtlety and delicacy. It was ironic: having finally become a night person I was now engaged in a project that could not be pursued after dark. Samantha would have laughed.

Though she had considered herself an intellectual and was quite well read, Samantha had known very little about art. What few concepts she had picked up she tended to state dogmatically, as if intensity made up for information. One of these was the tenet that an artist's visions grew more powerful as the artist slipped gradually into insanity. She would cite van Gogh's progression of self-portraits as an example. "The trouble with your art," she would tell me, "is that you're too sane. You need to set free your dark side." I was never sure how serious she was. At the time the critique had infuriated me; now I considered it perhaps the only thing worth salvaging from our relationship.

I had been working steadily on my painting since my return to New Delhi, but now, after my visit to the Underground City, I had stopped. My vision, so clear these past few weeks, had been obscured; Courtenay's model had come between me and the canvas.

For several days I tried to paint around it, to recall the memory I was trying to set down. It had not been that long ago, after all. But it was no use; I was no longer sure which face I saw. Courtenay's style and subject had been my inspiration this time, and now it was working against me. I had brought with me no photographs, no sketches; I had to rely on the purity of vision. I was feeling the pressure of time; I knew I could not count on being undisturbed for too much longer. At night I felt no time pass; I experienced only a calm, Zenlike *now*. But I could not paint at night. And the sun moved the days relentlessly.

I knew what I had to do. I had to return to the Underground City and somehow—I had no plan—learn who or what it was I had seen. Only by doing that would I be able to end my preoccupation, to see past her face and view the face in my painting clearly again.

I thought of waiting until nightfall to take advantage of whatever subtle magic the darkness might bring. But that was not necessary; it was always night in the Underground. I bought another ticket and descended the steps once more. It was easy to slip away from the group once we had reached Alastair Street, to hide in the darkness of a recessed doorway

until they were gone. Then I made my way down the narrow Parisian street to Courtenay's studio.

The mannequin of Courtenay still stood before his easel, studying the model's casual pose. I stared at the still life for what seemed an age, waiting for one or both of them to move. Nothing happened. I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes until bright green lights swirled in darkness. What was I doing? I was far too old to be chasing phantoms; I had been an artist far too long to justify blaming my failure to create on so absurd a concept as ghosts. I had to seek what reasons there were for my inability within that small apartment on Evangeline Street, not here in a city of the dead.

I opened my eyes—and saw that the model was gone.

The door was secured with an anachronistic padlock and hasp. I had to break the window with my shoe and carefully pick the shards of glass from the frame before I could vault into the studio. I was sure my action would bring a security guard or some other official, but there was no sound. In fact, I realized when I stopped to listen that the silence was perfect; I could no longer hear the faint voices of the tour group in the distance.

The model of Justin Courtenay stood calmly before me. This close, I could see that it was not a particularly inspired or maintained reproduction; the plaster tips of his fingers were chipped, and his eyes were the wrong color. I stepped around the easel to look at the canvas, and was not surprised to find it blank.

Oddly enough, I felt no worry over my forced entry, even though I knew what repercussions discovery could bring. Such concerns seemed remote, unreal, belonging to another age. I stepped through the far door the model had used for escape the previous time.

I don't know what I expected to find; what I found was a room filled with dusty boxes, crates, and stacks of partially dismembered nude mannequins. On the floor before me was a rumpled piece of white fabric with dark stains. The only light filtered dimly from the street. A rear door, barely visible, was partially open. Beyond it lay blackness.

It was at this point that I finally became afraid.

There was no hint of light beyond the door—and yet I knew, somehow, what was waiting in the darkness. I picked up the robe on the floor before me; the robe that the model had been wearing. It was still warm; the dark stains streaking it were still wet.

I looked at the door again. If she waited out there, it would not be as a plaster mannequin, nor as the frightened model I had seen in my

previous glimpse of this past. It would be as Courtenay had painted her, in his last, most powerful vision.

My mouth was dry. I could smell the cloying scent of pigments and oils—and something darker. I dropped the robe, turned and stepped quickly back into the studio.

The statue of Justin Courtenay was gone. The studio was empty, save for the furniture and the easel. No fire, real or simulated, burned in the fireplace. The painting upon the easel was *Eros Exotica*; the fresh pigments gleamed in the flickering light from the street gas lamps. I knew that if I touched it, it would be as wet as the bloodstains on the robe.

I stared at it, fascinated. It is one thing to view a reproduction of such a work, quite another to witness the vibrant original. Though I was familiar with every line, every nuance of it, still I stood, paralyzed with horror and admiration, at the genius of Courtenay's work. He had shown the same skill with the knife as with his brush. What in lesser hands would have been mere psychopathic barbarism had here been elevated to art—a sculpture of living flesh.

I tore my gaze from it and looked toward the window. It was unbroken. Through it I could see lights in other windows, and, above the buildings, a sky filled with stars as mad as van Gogh's.

The Night People walked the street.

I could see them quite clearly—women in bustled silk dresses, men with muttonchops and canes. These were the real Night People, I knew, the ones upon whom Courtenay had based his famous work. They sauntered casually through the evening air of Alastair Street, nodding and tipping hats to each other. I recognized the dark, brooding face of Edgar Allan Poe as he stopped to speak to a gentleman who could be none other than Ambrose Bierce. This was impossible, of course—Poe had died of debauchery while Bierce was still a child. I watched Sara Eaton, her skin as white as the marble she sculpted, strolling proudly with her lover, the ballerina Anastasia Cyril. From an upstairs window a whore leaned, her bare breasts polished by the gaslight, and waved at prospective customers. Egan Marnauk and Miguel Gaspar, Goya's only disciple, stumbled drunkenly across the street in pursuit of a girl barely in her teens. They had no more been contemporaries on Alastair Street, I knew, than had Bierce and Poe. I saw other artists, famous and infamous, some acquaintances of those about them, others separated by years or decades. But all walked Alastair Street this night.

There was no sound; even the carriages and horses on the cobblestones were silent. And then I heard a noise behind me.

I turned and saw her emerging from the night beyond the second floor,

her face still in darkness, the blood running like shadows over her body. I heard again the drops hitting the floor. She took another step, and her face became visible. When I saw it, I screamed.

I ran from the studio into the midst of the Night People. Though they were all about me, I collided with none of them, and they took no notice of me at all. I broke through them and ran. Alastair Street stretched before me, endless, serpentine . . .

"Set free your dark side," she told me, more than once. Our quarrels, as I have said, had been dry and intellectual for the most part—at first. But we both had gradually descended into that gulf between us, accusing each other of darker things, things worse than infidelity and uncaring, worse even than disparaging each other's talent. For at the bottom of that gulf lay madness—the ultimate artistic goal. And we had come to suspect each other of it; and from there, to encourage it.

I don't know how long it took me to reach the steps that rose to the surface streets. At one point I heard shouting behind me, glimpsed one of the Underground City's security personnel running after me. Perhaps they had seen me break the glass. I did not stop running.

It was night, of course, when I emerged. In Xavier Square the crowds were thick and varied: teenagers with spiked hair and tattooed cheeks; gays in leather, handcuffs locked on their belts; brightly-colored prostitutes. Their pervasive decadence seemed nothing, somehow, when I compared them with the sedate strollers I had seen. And yet they were the same; as I stumbled home, it seemed I could glimpse among the crowds gentlemen in ascots and bowlers, and ladies veiled in lace. It was the same endless night I had seen on Alastair Street—the same night in which I had left Samantha.

I had succeeded in my purpose, at least, though not in the way I had intended. The face that had emerged from the shadows in the studio had not been that of Courtenay's model. Instead, I had seen what I needed to see to finish.

When I reached my studio, I did not turn on the lights. I opened the curtains, letting moonlight flood in. They say that not even the light of a full moon is enough to discern colors by, yet even so, the pigments were more vivid to me than ever before. I tore the canvas I had worked on so long from the board, and stapled a new one to the stretcher bars. Each shade and color seemed almost luminous as I set to work.

Since this night was the same as all nights, then it would also be the night in which they found me. But I knew that this would not happen until the last stroke was laid. And I was right; it was not until I laid the brush down that I heard the knock on the door, the gruff identification.

I took down Courtenay's prints; they had served their purpose. I did not answer the knock. The landlady let them in at last and turned on the light. I had to shut my eyes against its glare, and so was unable to see their reaction. I could hear their gasps, of horror and disgust, however; could hear the landlady turn and run from the room. It was only then that the relief, the release, which I had been seeking for so long flooded over me. An artist's work is incomplete, after all, until it is experienced by others.

I smiled at them. "I call it *Samantha in the Night*," I said.

Ceremony

William F. Nolan

William F. Nolan has written some 45 books, 90 short stories, numerous teleplays and screenplays, and something like a thousand essays, articles and reviews. Despite all this, Nolan is best known to science fiction and fantasy fans as the co-author (with George Clayton Johnson) of Logan's Run. Perhaps this is because Nolan's far-ranging enthusiasms have spread his output over too many genres. For example, his most recent output: a book on Max Brand, a book on hard-boiled detective fiction (The Black Mask Boys), a collection of horror stories (Things Beyond Midnight), and an NBC Movie-of-the-Week about Jack the Ripper (Bridge Across Time).

Born March 6, 1928 in Kansas City, Nolan has lived in the Los Angeles area since 1953, where he has written full-time since 1956. His first science fiction book, a collection of stories entitled Impact 20, was published in 1963. He is author or editor of several other books in this genre, as well as the compiler of the annotated bibliography, The Ray Bradbury Companion. His stories have appeared in more than 120 anthologies, but this is his first appearance in The Year's Best Horror Stories. "Ceremony" was inspired by a forced bus ride to Providence, Rhode Island where he attended a World Fantasy Convention. Nolan feels that it is his best story: "For me, it is the end product of thirty years of pro fiction." Have a look.

HE HATED RIDING cross-country in a bus almost as much as he hated driving cross-country, but the problem was he'd missed his rail connection getting into Chicago and just couldn't wait for the next train. He *had* to be in Providence by Thursday evening to meet the Sutter woman. So it was the bus or nothing.

Mrs. Sutter was leaving that same night for Europe, and when she returned she expected her husband to be dead. The contract had to be settled before she left and the advance paid him. He didn't ice rich, unfaithful husbands unless he was well paid for the job, half down, the

other half after the hit. Funny part of this one, he would have done old Sutter for *free*. Because of the total. He'd dispatched 13 people (would joke sometimes about "working as a dispatcher") since he'd gone into this business and he needed to break the total.

It wasn't that he was superstitious. Never had been. But, in plain, hard truth, that damned number 13 was unlucky for him. No question about it. He was 13 the time his father had split out for good, when they were living in that crummy, red-brick, coldwater flat in St. Louis. Not that he loved his old man. Not that bum. It was just that his father was usually able to keep his mother from beating the crap out of him. She beat him senseless twice that week, after the old man had split. Took it out on him. Way she took everything out on him. Always had. He was missing three teeth because of her. Good ole Mom.

That was the same week he ran off to Kansas City and got a job as a stacker in a paper-box factory after lying about his age. He'd looked a lot older than 13.

Then there was a double-13 on the license plate of that big, pink Lincoln convertible the blonde had driven when he'd hitched into Boulder City a few winters back. The blonde had been fun, sure, but she was coked out of her gourd when she flipped the car on a hairpin turn in the mountains and almost killed both of them. She thought it was funny, having a double-13 on her plates. Yeah, funny.

And, in Nam, there was a transport number, 13-something, painted on the tail of that lousy chopper that went down in the rice paddy. He'd been sent back to the States after that, with a Purple Heart, but the crash had killed his best buddy—the one real friend he'd ever trusted. He didn't trust people as a general rule. People screwed you up when you trust them. But he'd trusted Eddie . . .

There had been a lot of 13s in his life, all tied into hard times, bad breaks, heavy losses. And now, by Christ, his *job* total was 13. Bad luck. But Mr. Sutter would make it fourteen and everything would be okay again. Life was fine, so long as he stayed away from the 13s.

"The bus will get you into Providence by late Thursday afternoon," the train clerk had assured him in Chicago. "But it's a long trip. Rather exhausting. We'd suggest a flight."

"I don't take planes," he told the clerk. He didn't tell him why.

It wasn't the chopper crash in Nam. Not that. It was the dream. About a commercial airliner, a big 747. Falling, with him strapped inside, staring out the window. Going down fast, people screaming, a jet engine on fire with the right wing burning. Paint cracking and peeling in the

fierce heat, with the flames eating at a number on the trailing edge of the wing. A number ending in 13.

The *one* job he'd had trouble with, killing Wendl, that banker in Tucson, when a piss-ass schoolkid had seen him come out of Wendl's house after the job and called the cops, *that* one had been the 13th. He originally planned it for the fourteenth, but when he found out Wendl's family was returning from their trip a day early, he was forced to make the hit. But never again. No more jobs on the 13th, no matter *how* much he got paid. He'd learned a lesson there, in Arizona. Cops had almost nailed him for sure.

So now he was on a bus in late October, heading for Providence, Rhode Island, ready to eliminate Mr. James T. Sutter at the personal request of his loving wife, Jennifer. He'd get the advance from Mrs. S. and spend a week in Providence, then ice the old fart before taking a train back to the Coast.

Bringing his job total to fourteen.

He grinned, closing his eyes . . .

. . . and woke with a jolt, feeling cold glass strike his forehead. He'd nodded off, lulled by the rocking motion of the bus, and his head had bumped the window. He straightened, coughing, and wiped a small trickle of saliva from his chin. That's how it was on a long bus ride, with those fat tires hypnotically thrumming on the road, setting up a measured vibration in your body, making you drowsy. Your eyelids get heavy, slide down; your mouth gapes, and you doze. And wake. And blink. And doze again.

Time is meaningless. You don't know where you are, what town you're passing through. Don't care. Your back aches, and your feet are swollen inside your shoes. Your clothes itch, tight and sweaty around you. You smoke, but the cigarettes taste sour.

Hours of travel along strange highways, suspended in a surreal vacuum between night cities and day cities, looking blankly out at hills and rivers and passing traffic, chewing on stale Clark bars from paint-chipped vending machines in musty-smelling depots. Riding endlessly through country you'd never seen and never wanted to see.

It was early afternoon on Highway 95. Sun half down along a rolling horizon of green hills. They'd just crossed the state line from Connecticut. He'd seen the big sign with a girl's smiling face painted on it . . .

WELCOME TO RHODE ISLAND!

A Nice Place Visit.

A NICER Place to Live.

He suddenly remembered a song he'd heard when he was very young. His old man had this classic recording of the Andrews Sisters—Patty, Laverne and somebody—singing energetically about “poor little Rhode Island, smallest of the forty-eight . . .” There had been only forty-eight states when the Andrews Sisters had made the record, and he remembered feeling sorry for the place. He'd been a little kid, shorter than most of his schoolmates, and he identified with smallness. One summer he'd found an abandoned pup, a real little guy, obviously the runt of the litter, and had taken it home. But his mother strangled it. She didn't like pets. Poor little Rhode Island . . .

They were passing through farm country in the western part of the state. Lots of big rocks, with dirt-and-gravel roads branching off into fields (what were they growing?—he sure as hell didn't know) and with pale white Colonial farmhouses off in the distance. He spotted some apple orchards, and there were plenty of elm and oak trees along the road, all fire-colored. Like passing a circus. He wasn't much for scenery, but this was special—New England in October, putting on a class show for the customers.

How many hours had it been since they'd left Chicago? Twenty, at a guess. At least that long. It seemed like weeks, riding these endless gray highways.

The bus was nearly empty. Just him in the back section and an elderly couple up front. It had been crowded at first—but people kept getting off. More at each depot stop. Finally, it was just the three of them and the driver. Well, nobody in his right mind rode a bus for twenty hours. But it was almost over. Not long now into Providence.

He closed his eyes again, let the singing tires take him into sleep.

He woke to darkness. Thick black Rhode Island night outside the glass, an interior dark inside the bus. He'd been jarred awake by rough road under the wheels. Narrow and bumpy. Why had they left the main highway? Jesus! He'd been due into Providence before dark.

He got up numbly, bracing himself against the seat back, then walked forward unsteadily along the aisle past the elderly couple (godawful bony-looking people) until he reached the driver.

“Where are we?” he asked, squinting into the night. “Why aren't we on 95?”

The driver was a thin character, with gaunt, stretched skin. He stared

intently ahead at the narrow road, illuminated in floury-white patches by the probing lights. "Sorry, buddy, I had no choice."

"What's *that* mean? How late are we going to be getting into Providence?"

"Won't be there till morning," said the driver. "You'll have to spend tonight at the Mill. We'll be coming in soon. Maybe another ten minutes."

"The hell you say!" He leaned over to grip the driver's thin shoulder. "Turn this thing around and get us back on the main highway! I'm due in Providence tonight, and by God you'd better get me there!"

"No can do, buddy. Engine's fouled up. Overheating real bad. May be the carburetor, dunno. Only place to get 'er fixed is at Doour's Mill. They got a garage there. You ask me, lucky we made it this far. Gotta admit it sure beats being stuck someplace out on the road."

"Is there a phone at the garage?"

"Oh, sure. You can call from the Mill. No problem."

He started back toward the rear of the bus, thinking it's 13 again. *That's* why this job has gone sour. He checked his watch. Damn! Won't do any good to call Providence now. She's gone. Off to sunny Italy. Figured it for a chicken job; figured I didn't want the contract. She'll hire it out later, after she gets back.

Unlucky.

Okay, he told himself, ease down. You can score another contract in New York. Just have to put off going back to the Coast for a while. Plenty of action in New York. He had some good contacts there. He'd make it fourteen in New York. Just relax. What's done is done. Don't fight it.

"Happy Holiday!" said the couple, one after the other, both saying it to him as he passed them on the way to his seat.

He paused, gripping an upper handrail as the bus shuddered over a deep cut in the gravel road. "Uh, yeah . . . same to you."

When he reached his seat in the SMOKING PERMITTED section, he slumped down heavily, got out his cigarettes. Dead pack. He tossed it away, dug out a fresh one. He lit a Salem, drew in smoke, sighed, settled back into the cushion.

He'd forgotten; tonight was Halloween! This was it, all right, October 31st. As a kid, it had been his favorite holiday.

He never got presents for Christmas, or for his birthday, and Easter was a drag. But Halloween was nothing but great—the *one* night in the year when people gave you things. Free candy . . . cake . . . apples . . . doughnuts . . .

He smiled, remembering.

The bus lurched to a creaking stop. Doors hissed open.

They were at the garage, a weathered building with light seeping from its fogged windows. A dented Ford pickup was parked in front with the words HARLEY'S REPAIR SERVICE painted on the side.

"All out, folks! Doour's Mill."

He stepped down onto the gravel roadway. The driver was helping the elderly couple from the bus. They moved slowly, cautiously, their bones like breakable china. That's how you get if you stick around long enough, he thought.

The garage owner, Harley, began talking to the driver. Very tall, in baggy trousers and a torn denim work jacket. Then the driver came around to open the luggage door on the bus.

He reached in for his travel bag. Light, compact, good leather. Had it custom-made to fit his needs. With a hidden compartment for the short-barrel .357 Magnum. Sweet piece of equipment. He'd started with a Browning .380 automatic, but he'd never trusted it. The Mag he trusted. Always got the job done. Easy to carry, with a real kick to it.

"You wanna use the phone, one's right inside."

"No, it's too late now. Forget it. There a cafe around here?"

"Straight ahead. Two blocks up. If it's open."

"Thanks." He checked his watch. Nine-thirty. "What time do we leave in the morning?"

"Be here by six," said the driver. "She'll be ready to roll by then."

"Okay."

He passed the dim-lit garage. In the smoked gloom, standing next to a high-piled stack of discarded truck tires, a lean, unshaven mechanic in greased blood-dark coveralls stared out at him.

He continued along the street. The gravel gave way to concrete, but the ground was still uneven. Tufted grass spiked up from wide cracks in the surface. The ancient Victorian houses along the street were in equal disrepair, their gabled bay windows cracked and shadowed. Porches sagged. Roofs seemed hunched against the night. Doour's Mill had gone to seed, a time-worn New England relic of a town that seemed totally deserted.

It wasn't. A pair of teenagers, holding hands, came toward him, heads together, talking quietly. They looked underfed. The girl had no figure at all. "Happy Holiday," they said to him as they passed.

He didn't answer them. No point in it. Terrific town for a holiday.

He had no trouble finding the cafe. It was the only building along the main street with a neon sign. MA'S PLACE. Reminded him of his mother. He didn't like that. When he got closer, he saw that the first two letters had burned out. It was ALMA'S PLACE. Several other letters in the sign

were dying, slowly dimming, flickering and buzzing in the air above his head like trapped insects.

He opened the door, stepped inside.

He was the only customer.

The waitress behind the worn linoleum counter was obviously young, but she looked like an anorexic. Pasty skin. Long, bony face with watery brown eyes. She blinked at him. "Hi, mister."

He said hello, asked if she was serving hot food.

"Sure, till ten o'clock we do. I mean, no steaks or specials this late, but I can fix you some eggs."

"Okay, that'll do. Scrambled easy, with hash browns and wheat toast."

"Easy it is," she said, and walked back to the kitchen to fix his order.

He sat down on one of the counter stools, laid his travel bag over another, and glanced idly around. A few greenish-colored tables, some crooked wooden chairs, an old broken-faced jukebox in one corner. Dark, not working. Near the antique cash register somebody had tacked a paper plate to the wall. On it, scrawled in black crayon: HAPPY HALLOWEEN!

He chuckled. They can't even spell Halloween in this godforsaken town.

The waitress ambled out of the kitchen with eggs and toast. "Sorry, no more hash brown," she said. "But I can give you some sliced tomatoes. As a substitute, no extra charge. Not too fresh, though."

"This'll be all right," he told her. "With coffee."

She nodded, pouring him a cup. "It's kinda strong. You use cream?"

"No."

"Well, it's kinda strong."

"It'll be fine," he said, spooning sugar into the cup.

"I hope the toast is okay. I tried not to burn it."

"It's fine," he said.

He began to eat. One thing you can order safely in a joint like this, he told himself, is eggs and toast. Hard to screw up eggs and toast. These were all right.

He sipped the coffee. Ugh! Bitter. Damn bitter. He spooned in more sugar. Helped some, but not much.

"I toldja it was strong," the girl said.

He didn't say anything.

"Guess you wonder, this being Alma's Place, who's Alma, huh?"

"Hadn't thought about it."

"Alma was my mother."

"Was?"

"She died. Little over a month ago. Just didn't last till the Holiday."

He looked up. "You mean—until Halloween?"

"Right. She just didn't last."

"Sorry."

"Well, we all gotta go sometime. Nobody lives forever, right? It's like the Indians used to say—about how when it's your time an' all."

He spread butter on his toast. It was burned. "Guess you don't get much business around here."

"Not much. Not anymore. Used to be the cotton mill was open. They named this town after it, Doour's Mill. Owned by Mr. Jonathan Doour."

"What happened to him?"

"He died and it closed down. All the mill folk moved away. We got only a real few left in the town now. Real few."

"Why do you stay?"

"I own the place is why." She shrugged, picking at a shred of loose skin on her lower lip. "Mama wanted me to keep it going. Besides—" and for the first time she smiled—"people gotta eat!"

"I didn't see any other lights along the street," he said. "Are you the only one open at night?"

"Mr. Exetor's drugstore stays open. Half a block down." She pointed. "He's open to ten, like here."

"Good. I could use some cigarettes."

"He's a widowman, Mr. Exetor is. Wife passed on end of the summer. Just wasted away."

He finished eating, pushed his plate back.

"More coffee?"

"I'll pass. Too strong for me."

"Yeah, like I said, it's kinda strong." She looked at him with intense, shadowed dark eyes. "You're invited to the Ceremony."

"What?"

"You're invited. We have it each Holiday. On October 31st, each year. And you're invited."

"I don't go to church," he said. "But thanks anyhow." He got out his wallet. "How much do I owe you?"

"That'll be seventy-five cents," she said.

"Here's a buck. Keep the change."

"Thanks, mister." She rang up his order on the ancient cash register. "Ceremony's not in church. Fact is, we don't have a church here anymore. I mean, we *have* one, but it's boarded up. They broke all the windows."

"I see." He picked up his travel bag, moved to the door.

"Happy Holiday," said the girl.

"Same to you," he said, and walked out.

It was raining now. A thin misting foggy rain. The street glistened like black leather under the pale light cast by the cafe's overhead neon.

He turned up the collar of his coat and walked to the drugstore. No sign outside, but the window said EXETOR'S, in chipped gilt. He walked in, and a tiny bell tinkled over the door.

Exetor was round-shouldered, cadaverous, with a bald head and long, big-knuckled hand. A thick vein pulsed, wormlike, in his mottled neck. Looked as if he'd be joining his wife soon. Well, in a town like this, it didn't matter much whether you were alive or dead. The old man had been fiddling with a box of pipe cleaners and now he put the box down. "Might I help you, sir?"

"Salem Hundreds. Two packs."

Exetor walked behind a dust-filmed tobacco counter and got the cigarettes. "You from the bus?"

"That's right."

"I saw it come in."

"Our driver had some engine trouble. We were due in Providence. Is there a hotel in town?"

"Certainly," said Exetor, accepting payment for the cigarettes and ringing up the sale. "The Blackthorn. Just down the way. Right at the intersection. You walk left. Big three-story building on the corner. Can't miss it."

"I sure never expected to be staying *here* tonight."

"No problem getting a room at the Blackthorn. Not many folks around anymore. Expect they'll be closing one of these days. Like me. Just not enough business to keep any of us going."

He nodded. "I can see that."

Exetor smiled thinly. "Sad. About this town, I mean. So much history here. Have you heard of Roger Williams?"

"Can't say I have."

"Strong-minded man, he was. They banned him from Massachusetts for religious nonconformity. But that didn't stop him. He established the first settlement in Providence, in 1636. Remarkable man." Exetor's voice grew more intense. "Jonathan Doour was related to Williams. Had an oil painting of him hanging on the wall of his office at the mill. So this town's part of history, you see. All of it, tied together—going back to 1636."

"Gives you something to hang on to, I guess." The old guy was a real bore. Who gives a damn about some religious nut from the 1600s? Maybe that's what the Ceremony was all about—honoring his memory or some such crap.

"Each year, more of us pass on," said Exetor. "Just don't make it to the Holiday."

"You people seem to think a lot of Halloween."

"Oh, yes, indeed we *do*," Exetor nodded, the neck vein pulsing. "It's very important to us here at the Mill. We have our Ceremony at this time each year."

"So I've been told. I'm not much for ceremonies."

Exetor clucked his tongue against yellowed teeth. "It's the only day I really look forward to anymore," he said, his voice soft with regret. "My wife and I always attended together. I'll be alone this year."

"Oh, yes—I heard about your wife. That's tough." He edged toward the door. This old geezer planned to talk all night.

"It's most difficult, getting on without Ettie."

He was almost to the door when a wall sign caught his eye.

HAPPY ALL HOLLOWS EVE

Again, misspelled. Should be *All Hallows*. Didn't anybody ever go to school in this burg?

He reached the door, opened it. The bell tinkled.

"You are invited to the Ceremony," said Exetor.

"No thanks." He started out—and heard Exetor say: "Attendance is not voluntary."

He left the drugstore. Now what the hell did *that* mean? He looked back through the cracked plate-glass window at the old guy. Exetor was standing there, staring out at him, not moving.

Weirdo. Him *and* that chick at the cafe. Both of them, weirdos.

It was still raining. He shifted the weight of his travel bag from right to left hand and began to walk in the direction of the Blackthorn. He was feeling kind of lousy. Stomach upset. Headache. Maybe it was the long bus ride and his missing the Sutter contract. He'd be fine once he'd moved up his total to fourteen.

Right now, he just needed a good night's sacktime. He checked his watch. Getting toward ten. Exetor and the cafe girl would be closing up, probably heading for their Ceremony. Fine. Just so they were quiet about it. No loud music or dancing. He grinned, thinking what ole Exetor would look like hopping around the floor. Exetor, the Dancing Skeleton!

He heard something behind him—the low-purring sound of a car's motor in the misting rain.

Cop's car. Sheriff. And with a deputy in the seat next to him. The car glided slowly alongside, stopped. Jeeze, he hated cops. *All* cops.

"Evening," said the sheriff.

"Evening," he said.

The lawman was gaunt and sharp-featured. So was his deputy. And both solemn. No smiles. But then, cops don't smile much.

"Just into town, are you?"

They damn well *knew* he was—but they liked playing their cop games.

"I came in earlier with the bus. They're fixing it. We had a breakdown."

"Uh huh," said the sheriff. "Harley, over to the garage, he told me about the trouble."

A pause—as they stared at him from the car's shadowed interior. The motor throbbed softly, like a beating heart in the wet darkness.

Finally, the sheriff asked: "You staying at the hotel?"

"I plan to. Guess they've got plenty of room."

The sheriff chuckled wetly, a bubbling sound. "That they have, mister." Another pause. Then: "Mind if we look over your suitcase?"

He stiffened. The Mag .357! But unless they tore the travel bag to pieces, they wouldn't find it.

The sheriff remained behind the wheel as his deputy got out, knelt in the wet street to open the bag.

"Gonna ruin your pants, Dave," said the sheriff.

"They'll dry," said the deputy, sifting through the contents, patting down shirts, fingering coats.

He tried to look normal, but he was sweating. The hidden gun compartment was just under the deputy's right hand. If he . . .

"Thanks, mister," said the deputy, snapping the bag closed. "Never can tell what folks'll carry."

"Guess not."

The deputy got back in the car, leaned out from the rolled-down window. His voice was reedy. "Happy Holiday," he said.

The car rolled forward, gradually losing definition in the misting darkness.

The hotel was no surprise. Meaning it looked crappy. Sagging. Falling apart. Paint-blistered. Wood missing from the upper porch steps.

Well, it's like my sweet mother used to say, beggars can't be choosers.

He walked up the steps, avoiding the broken areas, and entered the lobby through a loose-hinged, leaded-glass door. The lobby was bare, dusty, deserted.

A clerk dozed behind the wall counter. Another skinny character. Middle-aged scarecrow in a rumpled suit. His nose was long, thin, almost transparent.

"I'll need a room."

The clerk's head jerked up like a stringed puppet. He blinked, reached for a pair of thick-lensed glasses, put them on. Pale blue eyes swam behind the lenses. "Cost you five dollars."

"I think I can handle that."

"Sign here. Name and address." The clerk pushed a card across the grimed counter.

He signed it, using a phony name and address. Never tell anybody the truth about yourself. He'd learned that in Kansas City. And a lot of other places.

He gave the clerk a five-dollar bill. And got a key.

"Guess I'm not the first here tonight," he said.

"Don't get you, mister."

"There was an elderly couple on the bus with me, coming in. They must have registered earlier."

"Nope." The clerk shook his head. "You're our first in 'bout a week. Nobody else tonight."

Strange. Where would they go?

"Yours is on three. Use the elevator. Stairs are rotted out. Sidney will take you up. If he's sleepin', just give him a poke. Room 3-H."

He nodded, moved across the wide, vacant lobby with his travel bag to the elevator. Its metal-pleated door was open. Inside, draped over a high wooden stool like a discarded bundle of dirty clothes, was a stick-thin old man. His patchy hair was streaked gray-white over his long skull.

"You got a customer, Pop."

The deep-socket eyes opened slowly. He stared at the stranger out of large milky pupils. "What floor?"

"The top. Three."

He stepped into the cage and felt it give perceptibly under his weight. "This thing safe?"

"Weren't, I wouldn't be in it," said the old man.

The pitted grill-door slid closed and the old man pushed down a corroded wall lever. His wrist was ropy, spotted with sores. The ancient cage creaked rustily into upward motion.

The old man's odor was strong, almost fetid. "Staying the night, are you?"

"I'm not here for the floor show."

He was getting sick of dealing with these weirdos. Nothing to gain by continuing to answer their stupid questions. He was amused by the fact

that a sleazy hotel like this actually employed an elevator operator. No wonder the old croak slept on the job; nothing the hell *else* to do.

"We were the first state to declare independence from the Mother Country. You know that?"

He grunted.

"May the 4th, 1776, it was. We declared *two* months ahead of all the other colonies! Little Rhody was first, yes sir. First to declare."

"Were you *there*, Pop?"

The old man chuckled like dry leaves scraping. "Not hardly. But I've been around a spell. Seen things happen. Seen a lotta people die. But I made it again this year. Made it to the Holiday."

Another Halloween Freak.

They reached the top, and the black door folded back into itself like an iron spider.

He stepped out. The cage rattled downward as he walked toward 3-H. The hall reeked of mold and decay. Rug was damp, lumped. Ceiling was peeling away in thick, hanging folds, like strips of dead meat. He could hear the steady drip-drip-drip of rain coming in through the holes in the roof. Jeez, what a pit!

He reached the hallway's end. The door on 3-H startled him. It was a lot fancier than the others, ornamented in an intricately carved rose design. The knob was scrolled brass. He keyed the door open and swore softly. They'd given him the bridal suite! Well, why not? Nobody was about to pick the Blackthorn in Doour's Mill for a honeymoon!

It wasn't a suite, actually. Just one big chamber, with a bathroom off to the side. The bed, centered in the room, was enormous. Talk about your antiques! The tall gilt headboard was decorated with plaster angels. The gold paint had dimmed, and most of the angels had cracked wings, but he had to admit that the effect was still damned impressive.

A big faded-pink dresser loomed against one wall. Two velvet-black chairs, seedy but elegant, stood beside a huge cut-velvet couch fitted with rose-carved brass studs. A large mirror dominated the wall above them, framed in faded gold.

He walked over to it, looked at himself. Needed a shave. Coat and shirt wrinkled, damp from the rain. Looked like his old man. A bum.

The bathroom was full of badly chipped tile and rusted brass fittings. But at least there was a shower. He hadn't counted on one. Real bonus in a fleapit like this.

He opened his bag, took out the travel clock, set it for five-thirty. That would give him plenty of time to get dressed and down to the garage by six, when the bus was ready to leave. He'd be glad to shake this freak

town. Gave him the creeps. After Doour's Mill, New York would be Paris in the spring!

Damn! No inside chain lock. Just the regular knob lock. Well, that was okay. He always slept with the .357 under his pillow. Best protection in the world.

He had expected that the hot shower would make him feel better, but it hadn't. He still felt lousy, really kind of hung over. Dog tired. And sickish. Had to be the food at Alma's. Those eggs were probably half-spoiled. And that rat-piss coffee—that stuff would kill Frankenstein!

He slid his loaded Magnum under the pillow and put on a pair of white silk pajamas. The bed was great. Deep and soft, not at all lumpy or damp. And the sheets were crisp, freshly ironed. Not so bad after all.

It wasn't much after ten. He'd get a full night's rest. God, but he was beat. He stretched out on the big mattress, closed his eyes—and was instantly asleep.

He awoke slowly. Not to the clock alarm. To a low murmur of voices. Here. *In* the room with him.

"It's wearing off." Man's voice. Old.

"He's coming round." Woman's. Also old.

His eyes opened. He blinked, trying to get a clear focus on the dim figures in the room. The only light came from the bathroom and the door was partially shut. Things were murky.

There were several of them, surrounding the bed in a rustling circle.

"Welcome to the Ceremony," said the bus driver.

It was him, all right, and no mistake. Before he could fully register the shock of this, another voice said: "Happy Holiday!"

Focus. On the source of this second voice. It was Harley, the garage owner. His greasy mechanic stood next to him.

Now, rapidly, he ran his gaze over all of them: the elderly couple from the bus . . . Exetor . . . Alma's daughter . . . the lobby clerk . . . the old elevator man . . . the two skinny teenagers . . . Even the sheriff and his bony-faced deputy were here. Everybody he'd seen in the whole damn town—all here, around his bed, smiling down at him. And all of them thin, gaunt, wasted-looking.

He counted. There must be . . . Oh, Christ, yes, there were 13 of them!

A long iced wave of absolute fear engulfed him, and he closed his eyes to shut out the horrific ring of skulled faces.

"As I pointed out earlier this evening," said Exetor, "your attendance at the Ceremony was not voluntary. It was *required*."

"Yes, indeedy," agreed the hotel clerk, peering down at him with swimming fish eyes. "You're our Guest of Honor."

He tried to speak but could not; the words were choked bile in his throat.

"Can't give our Ceremony without a Guest of Honor," said the elevator man.

The elderly couple were holding hands. The woman spoke slowly, distinctly. "Henry and I weren't at all sure we'd last till the Hollow Day. Not at *all* sure."

"Each year at this time we gather to be replenished," said Exetor, "thanks to our Guest of Honor. Believe me, sir, we *appreciate* what you are giving us."

"I can have my baby now!" said the teenaged girl excitedly. The boy put his arm around her narrow waist. He kissed her gently on the cheek. Beside them, the garage owner's eyes shone with pride.

"Ain't many new babies born to Mill folk anymore," he said. "We cherish our young, we surely do. Laurie here—she'll have the strength to bear, thanks to you."

"That's right," the bus driver said. "I tell ya, buddy, we're *deeply* grateful!"

"I'm sure sorry that coffee I served you was so darn bitter," said Alma's daughter. "But the stuff I had to use in it tastes plain *awful*. Still, it's very restful. Keeps you from hurting when we're getting you ready."

He was fully awake now, and anger flushed through him. Under his pillow. The loaded .357 Magnum. He'd blow them away, every damned freakish one of them!

But he couldn't reach the gun. He suddenly became aware that his wrists were strapped to the sides of the bed, as were his ankles. And there was another wide leather strap across his chest, holding him down.

And . . . oh, God . . . there were the snakes!

Thirteen of them!

No, not snakes, they were . . . some kind of rubbery tubes. Coiling out from his body into the figures surrounding him, a tube for each of them, attached to his flesh and ending in *their* flesh—like obscene umbilical cords.

Jesus—they were *feeder* tubes!

"Ettie so wanted to be here," said Exetor softly. "It would have meant more months of life for her. But she just couldn't last to the Ceremony."

The sheriff patted the old man's arm in sympathy. "Ettie was a mighty fine woman."

He strained desperately against the straps, but they held firm.

"No use pushin' like that," said the mechanic in the rotted dark coveralls. "You ain't goin' nowhere. Sheriff Morland fixed them straps personal. They're good and tight."

He felt himself weakening now. Moment by moment, his strength was being bled away—into them. As he grew weaker, they grew stronger. Their eyes were brighter; their cheeks began to acquire a glow.

The waitress tipped back her head, closed her eyes. "Ummmmm, sure feels good!"

"Nothing will be wasted. I assure you," Exetor said. "We use *everything*. Even the marrow."

"Bone marrow's good for the teeth," said the teenaged boy. "And we need healthy teeth for our baby."

"Tell us your name and we'll call it after you," said the teenaged girl. "As a gesture, you might say."

"He won't tell," said the hotel clerk. "Gene Johnson was on the card, but I bet you ten dollars that name's a fake." He blinked downward. "Will you tell us your real name, mister?"

He gasped out the words: "You . . . can . . . all . . . go . . . to hell!"

They looked at one another. The bony deputy shook his head. "Well now, we sure hope the good Lord don't see fit to send us down *there*. We're all decent folk, here at the Mill. Always have been."

The figures in the rustling circle nodded agreement.

Things were dimming in the room. He blinked, feeling weak as a newborn cat. The anger was gone. The fear was gone. He was tired. Very, very tired. It was like being on the bus again, with the thrumming wheels making him drowsy. His eyelids were heavy. He wanted to close them. Did.

Darkness now.

And rest.

No more worry.

No more pain.

Everything was fine.

The Woman In Black

Dennis Etchison

Dennis Etchison is another of that small group of first-rank horror writers who have only with the recent upsurge of interest in horror fiction begun to receive the critical recognition they have quietly earned over the years. Born in Stockton, California on March 30, 1943, Etchison now lives in Los Angeles, where he teaches creative writing at U.C.L.A. An avid film fan, Etchison claims to know more movie trivia than David J. Schow. In spring of 1985 he was a staff writer for the HBO series, The Hitchhiker. Scream/Press has published two excellent collections of Etchison's short fiction—The Dark Country and Red Dreams—and a third is forthcoming. A novel, Darkside, was a summer release from Berkley Books. As editor, the versatile Etchison also has a series of reprint anthologies due from Tor Books, Masters of Darkness, as well as an anthology of original fiction from Doubleday, The Cutting Edge. Other books include novelizations of the horror films, The Fog, Halloween II, Halloween III, and Videodrome (the last three under the pseudonym Jack Martin).

WHEN THEY TOOK his mother away he went to live in the big house.

There he discovered rooms within rooms, drapes like thick shrouds, a kitchen stove big enough to crawl into, overstuffed furniture that changed shape as he passed, a table with claw feet larger than his head, ancient carpets with designs too worn to read, floor heating grates that clanged when he walked on them, musty closets opening on blackness, shadowed hallways that had no end.

These things did not frighten him.

For soon he made friends with the boy across the street; his aunts and uncles came by to help with the meals; it was summer and the back yard stayed light forever.

Before long, however, after only a few days and nights, he found that he could think of but one thing: of the lot next door, beyond the fence, of the high wall that kept him from its bright and dark treasures.

He was in the grove behind the arbor, about to pluck a fig from a low-hanging branch, when someone opened the front gate.

The fig hung there among pale jigsaw leaves, swinging to and fro like a black teardrop. He looked over his shoulder, through luminous bunches of grapes clinging to the lattice. The air was still. At the end of the arbor a plum dropped from a tree, splitting its skin as it landed and spattering the grass below with glistening juice. A piece of heavy iron groaned on the other side of the fence, the same sound he heard at night when the blue lights began to flicker; he was thankful it was day time now so that he could try to ignore it.

He turned his head in time to see his uncle striding toward him along the path, grinding fallen grapes into green stains on the gravel. The boy breathed again and returned his attention to the translucent leaves and the pendulous fruit swaying there.

"Hi, Uncle Ted."

"Willy." His uncle came up next to him and stood squinting sadly at the untended yard, at the scraggly weeds poking their way under the fence. "Have you talked to Grandma today?"

"When I got up. I made my own breakfast. I went into her room for a while. Then I went over to Vern's to play." He closed his fingers around the fig and pulled; the soft tissue bent and snapped and a milky drop of sap oozed out of the stem.

Uncle Ted shifted his weight and studied his shoes. "Do you like it, living here?"

"I like it fine. Uncle Ted, the Fair's coming to town next week. Vern says they have different rides this year. New animals, too. We're saving our money. Can I go?"

"We'll see, Willy, we'll see."

A breeze passed by, rustling the leaves. The tall iron that showed above the security fence groaned again but did not really move; that was only a tree throwing its shadow against the rusty bolts. On the next block a dog barked; Grandma's chickens clucked suspiciously in response. William peeled the fig and opened it like a flower in his hand. It was sweet and the tiny seeds popped in his teeth like soft sand.

"I know you miss your mother, Willy."

"Sure." He sucked at the fleshy pulp until his tongue tingled, smearing his face, and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. He discarded the skin and glanced up. Uncle Ted was waiting for something. What was William supposed to say? "Is she coming home today?"

"We all miss her. Very much."

"Tomorrow?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Saturday? Maybe Aunt Emily and Aunt Grace could come over and we could make a special dinner for her. I can wash the dishes, and afterwards—"

Uncle Ted cleared his throat. He twisted his fingers together behind his back and pointed his chin at the sky and took a deep breath so that his chest puffed out, his tan shirt taut. He was looking toward the top of the iron crane towering above the fence, but that was not what he was thinking about. It must have been something a long way off, higher and farther than William could see.

"No," said Uncle Ted.

"Oh."

The man sighed. He unclenched his hands and ran them nervously over his head. William remembered the way his uncle had looked after his last tour of duty, his close-cropped hair and the sharp creases in his shirt. Since he got back he wore looser clothes and did not stand so rigidly, but his hair was still short and brushed slick.

Now Uncle Ted stood straight again, locking his knees till he was as tall as he could make himself. William almost expected him to salute.

"You haven't been trying to climb over the fence, have you?"

"No, Uncle Ted. Only—"

"Only what?" The man squinted again, and this time his brow furrowed with anger. He began opening and closing his eyes very rapidly. He set his jaw and glared down at the boy.

"N-nothing," said William.

"You got something to say, boy, say it!"

"Well—" What was his uncle so upset about? William was sure it could be nothing he had done. "Well, sometimes I wish I could see what's on the other side. Do you know what's over there, Uncle Ted?"

"Nothing for a child to worry about. It's private property and don't you forget it. From the fence down to the river it all belongs to the government. Only thing for a little boy to do over there is slip and fall and get hurt, get himself into a whole lot of trouble. But we'd better be glad it's there. And proud! We'd better be!"

"I believe you, Uncle Ted. I never tried to climb over. I wouldn't even go near it. I know I'm not supposed to—to—"

His voice broke and his eyes watered so that the branches wavered and his uncle's legs buckled as if they were made of jelly. He felt an ache in his chest and a numbness in his lips and cheeks; suddenly the air around him was unseasonably cold, a warning of some impending change in the weather. A hurting welled up in him that went far beyond

this argument which was no argument at all and which seemed to make no sense.

A strong arm encircled his shoulders.

He opened his eyes wide. What he had seen a moment ago was true: now his uncle stood less tall, slumped as if the wind had been knocked out of him, his shoulders rounded under an oppressive weight. The man removed his arm self-consciously, put his hands together until his nails were white, and cracked his knuckles. The sound was painfully loud in the stillness, like bones breaking.

"I know, Willy," said his uncle, "I know." His eyes glazed with that same faraway look. He pinched his nose and massaged the furrow from his brow. William noted that the man's hand was shaking. "I'll take care of everything. From now on. We'll keep you safe and strong. We can do it. I know we can. Anything you need, you ask Aunt Emily or me and we'll do our best to . . ."

William said, "I think I'd like to visit my mother, if she's not coming home Saturday. I'd like to go soon. If that's all right."

The man shook his head, a decisive twitch. "They wouldn't let you in. Not even that. They never would."

William swallowed and cleared his head, trying to shake off the bad feeling. "Well," he said, "when *are* they going to let my mother out of the hospital?"

"When?" said Uncle Ted absently. "Wh . . ." And here his voice failed him for the first time. William wanted to do something to help him, to thump him on the back the way he did when Grandma got to coughing, but he could not reach that far. "I'm afraid," said the man, "that your mother's never coming back to Greenworth. You understand, don't you boy? Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

The moment was frozen in time. William wanted badly to break and run. His eyes darted around the yard, desperate to find a way out, a secret passage, a doorway in the fence that he had not noticed before.

His uncle held him by the back of the neck. But it wasn't necessary. He couldn't run now.

For there, behind the screen of the back porch, half-hidden but visible in dark outline, was the figure of a woman. She was dressed in a flowing black garment. William could not make out her features, not even her eyes, but he knew that she was watching him as he stood in the garden.

He sat with his grandmother, rubbing the circulation back into her wrists, as the day came to an end.

"Oh, you must go darling," she was saying. "Don't be afraid. There will be so many interesting things to see!"

"I don't want to," said William.

He knew his grandmother always let him have his way, even when it was not what was best for him, and he loved her for that. But now he had had a change of heart about going to the Fair and she would not understand. Had she turned against him at last?

It was as if she refused to acknowledge what had happened. She sat propped up in bed, looking out her bedroom window as usual, an expression of serene acceptance on her face. Didn't she notice that the back yard would soon be overgrown with stinky weeds like the ones near the fence? *My Grandma's getting old*, he realized, and then tried to force that thought from his mind.

She smiled and took his wrist in both of her hands. "I understand how you feel. It's only natural. But no one is ever quite ready for anything when it comes along. Besides, who knows what wonders you'll find waiting for you when you get there? It's not far at all."

She clasped his hands coolly and gazed outside again. A thin, blue twilight was rapidly descending, and already angular shadows had grown over the henhouse next to the fence, shading the tops of the machinery on the other side until the riveted joints and streaked I-beams became the jutting turrets of an iron fortress.

"Like what?" asked William without curiosity.

It would be no fun this time. How could it be? He had more important things to think about now, things he did not even know if he could make himself consider; things he felt certain he could not begin to understand. The Fair was too late this year, he knew, and his heart sank. From now on it would always be too late.

His grandmother drifted away from him, lost in the gray convolutions of the bed that marked the limits of her world now. Her eyelids closed halfway and her pupils thickened.

"Such wonders!" she said, her voice intense but growing fainter, her chest fluttering from the effort. "I've dreamed of them. Wings soft as clouds, doves with faces dearer than a baby's, all God's creatures come together at last . . . oh, darling, it will be so beautiful!"

"They have all that?" How could she know? The big trucks hadn't even crossed the city limits yet, he was sure. Only Vern seemed to know ahead of time, and that was because of his cousin who worked on the carnival crew. "Are you sure?"

"As sure as I've ever been of anything."

"Well," he said, "I still don't think I want to go."

"And why not?"

"I—it'd be too lonely."

"But you won't be alone!"

"Yes, I will," he said. He thought of Vern and the way his friend would behave around him now, cautious and polite, afraid to say the wrong things, so careful that they would have no fun at all. He remembered the way it was the day his father did not come home from the power plant, and for weeks after—the way everyone left him alone at school and did not ask him to play, as though he were fragile and might break if they came too close. Vern would walk apart from him all the way to the Fairgrounds, offering William too much of his candy and waiting for him to decide what they would do next, ride after ride, the whole time. It was more than he could bear. He would feel different, special, and that would only make the day longer and sadder.

"Oh, darling, I wish I could go with you! Perhaps I shall," she added, patting his hand again. "One can never be sure . . ."

Of course he knew she didn't mean it. She couldn't.

"I wish my daddy could go with me," he whispered.

She beamed. "He's already there."

"What?"

Her eyes grew strange. "Don't you know that, child? You must try to believe. It will be so much easier for you."

William felt a knot in his stomach. Suddenly he was no longer sure of anything. He wondered if he and his grandmother were even talking about the same thing.

"What else do they have?" he said too loudly, testing her. "Do they have—" He groped for a word. "Do they have gorillas? From Africa?"

"They do."

"And elephants?" That was a good one. He knew the Fair was too small to have elephants.

"That, too."

He thought of the dream last week, after he had heard the groaning sound louder than ever from deep within the enclosure. "Do they have birds with wings you can see through?"

"Yes."

"And—and a talking pig? Do they have a pit that talks, Grandma? Do they really?"

"I'm sure of it. Anything the mind can imagine, and more."

He sat forward, making fists. "No, they don't. It's only a Fair, Grandma. A Fair!"

"What a lovely way of putting it. The Animal Fair! And all just there, on the other side. So close, and getting closer all the time. Soon there

will be no barrier at all. The birds and the beasts . . . anything and everything, oh, yes!"

Anything? he thought. *If they have everything, do they have mothers there?*

He stood up in the close bedroom, his arms stiff at his sides, and stared defiantly at the old woman. But she only continued to peer out at the back yard as if it were a vision of the Promised Land, at the sea of weeds overrunning the grounds, the trees and vines that had grown gnarled and misshapen as her hands, the fruit that seemed to be illuminated by a cold light from within if you looked too closely in the night. Her eyes were filmed over; she could no longer see what had become of her home. Either that or she saw and embraced it all, and that possibility frightened him more than anything else.

"Don't you understand, Grandma? Don't you see? We—we've got to get away from here!"

Even after daddy got sick they had stayed because of his work, and then when it was too late his mother refused to leave out of some kind of loyalty to his memory, and because her brothers lived here, because Greenworth was her home. But now in a blinding flash he knew that they were wrong. Their faith was a stubbornness that was killing them all.

"I want to leave, Grandma. Let's move away. I can go to another school. We can sell this house and—"

"And go where? Another house, another street, it's all the same. Child, it's everywhere . . ."

"Someplace else, then! If we go far enough away you'll get well and—and—"

Grandma's shoulders moved; she was laughing or crying, he couldn't tell which. "Don't you see, Willy? It's too late to run. This is the way it is now. For all of us. No use fighting it. It's growing up all around. The only answer left is to cross over . . ." Her weeping chuckle became a cough.

William moved reflexively to thump her between the shoulder blades and end the spasm. But this time he could not bring himself to strike her for fear that her frail body might not withstand the impact of his small hand. He touched the flannel of her nightgown and felt how unnaturally cool it was, saw the wan flesh of her neck above the ruffled collar. He yanked his hand away. His fingers were tingling. He looked at his palm. It was ashen, bloodless. Like her skin. *Does it rub off, Grandma?* he wondered in a panic. *Does it?*

He sprang away from the bed, bolted from the bedroom and ran out of the house without looking back.

She's dead, she's really dead. It hit him full force as he fled down the

steps and into the garden. The stone path snaked out behind him, its tail eaten by the darkness gathering under the porch. Before him lay the remains of the back yard, a landscape that now seemed filled with skeletal trees and vines reaching impatiently toward the face of the rising moon. *My mother's dead.* He tore down the path, a chill piercing his heart. Branches like bony fingers tried to snare his arms. He zigzagged and caromed off a tree trunk, dislodging the last of the dark, testicular fruit drooping and shriveling there. *She's dead and she's never coming back not ever!*

He hurried by the chicken coop, seeing the bobbing necks of the hens and roosters as they gawked with alarm at his passing. Their wings spread and beat out a flurry of feathers that were like snowflakes on the air. He could not escape their agate eyes. He paused long enough to open the pen and calm their squeaking. They assembled between his legs, covering his own ankles with their plumage.

"Shh," he told them, "it's all right, we're all all right," and did not believe it.

They observed him indifferently, the few remaining feathers on their scrawny bodies settling back into place.

His eyes filled with tears.

As he knelt one small chicken, his favorite, flew onto his knee. He stroked its piebald head and kissed its beak. The others tiptoed away to scratch at the hard dirt, and as the flock parted he saw a shape on the ground by the water trough.

It was the oldest and plumpest of the hens, lying on one side with her claws curled inward. Her feathers rippled and lifted.

He rose to a crouch and crept closer. He wondered how long she had been dead. It couldn't have been very long, but already an army of ants had established a supply trail in and out of the open mouth, where the tongue protruded like a pink arrow.

He extended his arm to touch her, and immediately snatched his hand away as if she were hot. Damp feathers fell aside. The wrinkled skin was teeming with maggots, busily transforming the carcass into something he did not want to see.

He gagged and hid his face.

Who would take care of her chicks now? He reached behind the perch and found her nest. This time there were no peeps, no tiny pecks at his fingers. That was good. She had left no little ones behind. He felt the polished roundness of an egg. Gently he lifted it out.

The egg was smooth as porcelain but oddly soft. And cold. He cupped it gingerly in his hand and raised it to the dying light.

The shell was full-sized but not all of it had hardened properly. Part of the surface was nearly transparent, little more than a stretched membrane. He looked closer. Barely covered by the thin cellular wall was a distorted, malformed embryo. It was unlike any chick he had ever seen before, an error of nature mutated in vitro. Its congealed, elongated eye stared back at him through a delicate lace of veins.

William shuddered. Crying silently, he replaced the egg in the nest and covered it with straw. *There, he thought, you won't have anything to worry about now. Maybe it's better this way, after all.*

A cold wind blew through the trees. It whistled in from the front yard, catching and keening in the eaves of the house. Did something move there, just inside the screen porch? No, it couldn't be. Grandma never got out of bed anymore. If anyone else were inside there would be a light showing somewhere.

Could it be—?

No. There was nothing, nothing. He told himself that. He dug his nails into his hands until his palms bled. *What a baby you are. You're afraid of—of—*

There was a wailing sound. It blew in on the wind from the other side of the house.

He heard a commotion then, the dull clicking of heels on the sidewalk, and a scream. Somewhere a door slammed. The screaming did not stop.

He latched the chicken coop and hurried to the street.

At first nothing seemed out of place. The view from his gate was of the same houses, the roofs sagging under a dingy sky, the treetops jagged silhouettes against the horizon, their distended roots raising the pavement in uneven waves. There were the sunken boundary lines of cracked cement between the yards, only the reinforced security fence that began next door still tall and straight, porchlamps like the first stars of evening vibrating with oversized insects, Vern's house across the street leaking spikes of yellow light.

But wait. There was movement in the bushes by Vern's porch, a shaking out and a separating and then the stab of legs in the dimness.

Vern's mother was already at the corner, huddled under a streetlamp with her face in her hands. The shape of her body blended with the shadows so that she might have stood there for hours before William noticed her. But now Vern's older brother was running to bring her back to the house as the short bursts of screaming started again, tight and muffled by her knuckles.

William stepped off the curb.

The wailing at the end of the block became louder, rising and falling

like a buzz saw, as a long car cut across the intersection and sped up the middle of the street. William jumped out of the way and saw that it was one of the dark military vehicles from the plant, like the one that had come to take his mother.

ECNALUBMA, it said across the front.

It dipped and braked and three men in uniforms hopped down and raced to Vern's porch, a blur of equipment under their arms. The screen door flapped open. A moment later they reemerged carrying a litter, unfolded to support a bulky form. They were no longer in a hurry, and the sheet was drawn up all the way.

The screen door flapped again and Vern's family followed, heads low, their feet scraping the rough cement. There was Vern's sister Nan, two of the cousins from the next block, and Vern himself, so much shorter than the others. William looked for the stocky contour of Vern's father, the broad shoulders and thick waist, but no one like that came out except for the chunky mound under the sheet.

William called out and waved until Vern spotted him. His friend didn't wave back. His head was down between his shoulders and he was marching forward as though underwater.

Vern did not watch the men loading the gurney into the back of the van. The cousins waited solemnly a while longer, then went to help bring Vern's mother back. She did not want to come. Her screams became a whimpering. When Vern did not move, William started across the street.

"Vern? Hey, Vern! What happened? Are you all right?"

One more figure came out of the house. William did not know who she could be. By some trick of light and shade the door did not appear to swing open for her, and yet there she was, following Vern like a tall shadow. She glided down the walkway behind him, a breeze filling her draped black veil.

William stopped.

Vern finally raised his eyes, saw William, and his face relaxed slightly. But he did not come forward.

The woman drifted ahead, her flowing garment enfolding Vern and then passing him as though he were not there. She floated away from them all and into the street, heading for the house where William now lived. The wispy black material covered her completely, almost wrapping her legs and feet as it trailed out behind her, and yet she did not hesitate at the broken curb. As the veil blew against her face William thought he saw something familiar in the shape of her features, but he could not be sure. He turned to watch her cross the humped blacktop and alight on the other sidewalk.

Vern said something at last, but his words were lost on the wind.

The woman approached Grandma's house, only to bypass it in favor of the fenced-in area that began next door, not even slowing as she neared the high locked gate. Her face was still hidden by the veil, but William was sure that she was looking at him.

"No!"

Was Vern watching her, too? William looked back and saw his friend waving wildly, his arms raised in a railroader's highsign.

"No, Willy! Don't go in there . . . stay here! Don't . . .!"

It was too late. He had to know.

When William turned again she was already through the gate. The edge of her veil slipped through the metal links and disappeared inside the compound.

Drawn by a feeling he could not name, William ignored the ambulance as it pulled slowly away, its siren now silenced, and followed the woman in black.

The entrance was heavily chained and padlocked, as if no one had gone in or out for a very long time. He could not slip through or under. He could scale the fence and the wall behind it if he used the links in the gate for footholds, but the barbed wire at the top would be a problem. He disregarded the old warning signs posted around the perimeter, hooked his fingers into the ragged metal, and started climbing.

The barbs were sharp but he squeezed his eyes shut on the pain, rolled over the top as quickly as possible, and dropped down on the other side.

It wasn't very far at all.

The sounds of life in the street, the tinkling wind that blew across the town, the lights going out in the rest of the world were all distractions cut off from him now. The deepening darkness was inviting, a cushion that broke his fall and called him to enter it at last.

Where had she gone?

There was no path for him to follow. As his eyes adjusted he made out the struts and crossbeams of an old support scaffolding, the flaking treads of an abandoned earthmoving tractor, the corroded shell of an amphibious tank, a hydraulic scoop, the segments of a conveyor belt, a teetering stack of old tires shot through with twiggy, hybrid weeds. Somewhere behind the tires a flickering like cold fire shone between collapsed sidewalls.

He got up from his hands and knees and made his way through the debris.

He passed a junked truck and came out into a small clearing. The moon

was high above bowed tiers of rotting lumber, but it was a different light that beckoned him now.

He paused to get his bearings. The wall to his right might have been the fence along his grandmother's yard, but how could he be sure? Serpentine foliage pressed up to the boards in an ever-expanding tide; soon the last property lines would disappear, swallowed by the unchecked growth. He padded on, placing one foot carefully in front of the other as unseen life forms scurried out of his way, large insects or small animals, rats, perhaps, or something like them.

He brushed a dented panel, releasing a shiver of rust and dirt that fell around him like heavy rain. It was the cab of an outsized reconnaissance vehicle, apparently designed to maneuver over rough terrain. The steel door creaked on its hinges and sent a reverberation through the rest of the machinery.

He covered his head. The driver's seat was empty; the giant shift and brake levers were locked at odd angles, like the seized-up hands of a primitive timing device. He imagined that the vehicle might yet be capable of moving, inching forward to lead an assault under cover of darkness and establish a beachhead in occupied territory. That would explain the groaning he heard, loudest in the dead of night when everyone else was asleep, as though iron and steel were drawing relentlessly closer to the flimsy, unguarded barrier.

The rain of rust stopped. A last echo rang out. In the distant riverbed a population of bullfrogs resumed their fitful chorus. He tried to set a course from their singing but it was no use. There were no landmarks in this place, no way to know that he would not end up where he started. Fear gripped him as a new sound began, a steady rhythm like the pounding of surf on a far shore. It was the beating of his own heart in his ears.

Help me, he thought, please! Somebody—

A shadow like the dark, gauzy hem of a long dress skipped over the blade of a forklift, backlighted for an instant by a soft flickering the color of static electricity, and vanished behind the gutted chassis.

Without hesitation he moved toward it.

There was a narrow passageway between piles of ancient brake drums and hubcaps. He pulled in his elbows and pushed through, and came out into the blue light.

At first it was like the pale glow of the phosphorescent stars he had pasted to his bedroom ceiling, only larger and brighter and spread out in a wide band like the Milky Way. Then he focused and saw a loose barricade of old canisters. They were taller and broader than oil drums

and were marked with the same stenciled symbol he had seen on the signs outside, a circle divided into six wedges like a cut-up drawing of a pie. One of them had tumbled onto its side and probably leaked, because the lid was ajar and a heavy inner lining of chipped glass showed where the top had been. Directly in front of it the ground was bare and scorched, but behind the containers a tangle of skinny plants had taken root, and it was these that shimmered with a faint but unmistakable radiance.

On the ground before him, leading up to the cylinders and disappearing into the spray of shrubbery behind, was a series of elongated spots like ghostly footprints.

His placed his sneaker into one of them. The imprint was short and narrow but it fit him perfectly.

William started walking again.

His legs shook tall weeds, and a shower of pollenlike metallic dust settled on his skin. He looked at his hands, transfixed by their sparkling, and his toe thudded into one of the drums.

A few feet away, hidden only by the vegetation, there was an explosion of hysterical squealing and then a great thrashing, as if someone had taken a wrong step and plunged headlong into the darkness.

He swept the weeds aside.

There, sprawled on one side, was an enormous animal. It reminded him of the sows he had seen at the Fair in years past, and yet it was not one of their kind. It was much too large for any pen to hold, its snout thicker than his thigh, its huge underside rising and falling with peaceful regularity. It was black as coal from head to tail except for the immense belly, where now several smaller animals wriggled to regain position. Their fat shapes were stretched with translucent skin, their veins and capillaries aglow with a cold, unearthly light. Tiny silken hairs moved on their restless bodies, which were already pigmented in places with black spots that would soon toughen into a hide able to contain their new forms.

Does it talk? he wondered. *Does it, really?*

Awestruck, he stood and watched her suckling her hungry offspring. Then, stumbling desperately, he lunged forward into the glowing circle and flung himself at her teats, his hands feverishly pawing the air as he fought to gain a place there for himself.

